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## The Parenting Practices of Dual-Earner Couples Who Successfully Balance Family and Work

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**SUMMARY.** This study investigated the parenting practices of middle-class, dual-earner couples ( $N = 47$ ) who perceive themselves as successful in balancing family and work. Analysis of interview data revealed that couples used four primary strategies in balancing family and work: (a) striving to be equally involved parents, (b) working to clar-

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ify their values related to parenting, (c) being available and attentive to their children while also spending time as a couple and individually, and (d) utilizing the support of extended family and workplaces. These parenting practices run counter to common societal stereotypes regarding dual-earners. Clinical applications for therapists and parent educators of dual-earner couples are offered. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Dual-earner couples/families, parenting, working mothers

The purpose of this study is to investigate the parenting practices of middle-class, dual-earner couples who perceive themselves as successful in balancing family and work. The data for this study are part of a larger data set drawn from in-depth interviews with 47 couples. The intent of the overall project was not to determine the degree to which these couples were successful in balancing family and work, but to identify the adaptive strategies they utilized to facilitate balance; the intent was to discover *how* these couples achieved such success. This paper focuses specifically on the parenting practices of these couples. The results of this study provide couples and supportive professionals (e.g., therapists, family life educators) with research-based, practical guidance for effective parenting practices within the context of successful work-family balance. While the results of this study are applicable for many families, it is important to recognize that most of the couples interviewed for this study were Caucasian, highly educated, financially secure, and employed in supportive work settings. Therefore, the parenting practices of these couples occurred within a context of societal privilege and workplace support.

To appreciate the opportunities and constraints of today's dual-earner couples in parenting their children, it is important to understand the current societal discourse about these families as represented in the broader culture, such as the media. This discourse informs both lay and professional beliefs about dual-earner families, often in ill-informed and negative ways (Barnett & Rivers, 1996; Galinsky, 1999; Haddock & Bowling, 2002). It also is necessary to be familiar with the empirical literature about dual-earner families—literature that often contradicts the dominant cultural discourse about dual-earners. In the literature review,

we briefly describe significant aspects of the cultural discourse about dual-earner parents, and then review the relevant empirical literature. The parenting practices of this sample are discussed within the context of the social milieu, and clinical implications are offered.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *The Construction of Societal Myths*

Women, particularly those from marginalized economic and racial groups, have long been in the paid labor force. In the past four decades, there has been a significant increase in the number of women who are employed; in fact, the number of employed women has reached levels never before recorded (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000). Currently, dual-earner families far outnumber families in which the father, but not the mother, is employed. In 2000, 64% of married couples with children under the age of 18 were dual-earners as compared to 29% of families in which only the father was employed (Bureau of Labor, 2001). These proportions have been relatively steady since 1994 (Bureau of Labor, 2001). Scholars believe that these significant demographic changes have resulted from several factors, including economic changes that now require most families to have two incomes to ensure economic viability (Galinsky, 1999) and women's increased desires to be active and involved parents and partners as well as to be engaged in professional pursuits.

Despite a majority standing, the dual-earner family type is at the crux of a current social debate in US society—the debate about maternal employment and the viability of the dual-earner family arrangement. This debate continues in public and private discourses (Holcomb, 1999). For instance, the cover of the May 2001 issue of *National Review* shows crying and angry children in daycare—one of whom is angrily “flipping off” his unseen mother. The cover is captioned “Thanks, Mom! The Case Against Working Mothers.” On the other side of this debate are those (e.g., Barnett & Rivers, 1996; Holcomb, 1998; Galinsky, 1999) who contend that dual-earning is a viable and healthy option for women, men, and children, citing no evidence that the dual-earner family arrangement is inferior to other family arrangements with regard to nurturing healthy family relationships and children.

Many assumptions about dual-earner families characterize the public discourse, the most salient of which is that it is unduly difficult, if not

impossible, for dual-earners to be attentive, loving, and effective parents. The lyrics of a contemporary folk song by Iris DeMent (1996) reflect this assumption.

When they get around to dinner, they're damn near half dead  
 So they drive through McDonalds and put the kids off to bed  
 But they're upwardly mobile, and everything is fine  
 'Cause when they do get together it's quality time  
 And they've got nice big houses, and they've got nice big cars  
 And it looks from the outside like they're really goin' far  
 But there's trouble in the engine, and we're junkyard bound  
 If some moms and some dads don't start hangin' around.

It is likely that, just as in families of all types, some dual-earner families may fit DeMent's description. Yet, these are images commonly used to represent all dual-earner families. The cultural discourse involves assumptions that it is the dual-earner family arrangement that is problematic—not parental choices and circumstances that can exist in any family type.

The most common stereotype about dual-earning parents is that they are unable or unwilling to spend considerable time with their children, and that this lack of time compromises the quality of their relationships with their children, their ability to supervise their children adequately, and to instill appropriate values in them. Phrases such as “time fatigue,” “time bind,” “quality time,” and “latch-key kid” are used frequently in reference to dual-earner couples' parenting practices. The children of dual-earner couples often are portrayed as deprived of parental love while being “raised” by child-care providers (Barnett & Rivers, 1996; Galinsky, 1999; Holcomb, 1998).

This debate typically lands squarely on the shoulders of women, where employed women are often stereotyped as selfish, ambitious, uncaring, and materialistic—more interested in their careers than in spending time with their children (Holcomb, 1998). For instance, a recent cellular telephone advertisement featured a working mother spending a day with her daughter at the beach. While the mother is busy receiving business calls on her cellular telephone, the daughter pleads to be her mother's only client for the day. Dr. Laura, host of the number one radio show in the US in 2000, includes full-time employed mothers on her list of societal trends that are “a disaster to the lives and emotional well-being of the child” (Schlessinger, 2000, p. 7). Dr. Laura goes so far as to equate maternal employment with child abuse and neglect in her best-sell-

ing book. Regarding employed mothers, she asked, “How can you be something to someone if you're not there all day to do it?” (Schlessinger, 2000, p. 9). She claimed that employed mothers do not spend sufficient time with their children or have significant relationships with them (of course, by this logic, working fathers have never been “something” to their children either). And, Lowry (2001) said it bluntly:

Mothers who choose to work full-time jobs and routinely leave their young children with others for much of the day are not normal: They are a historical aberration; they represent a minority preference among women; and they run exactly counter to the standard of motherhood that should be encouraged by society . . . the fact is that working moms are at the very center of a variety of cultural ills. Maybe a little stigma is exactly what they deserve. (p. 36)

Lowry is clear that what he believes is “normal” is nothing short of women always living only for their children. He wrote that employed mothers should feel guilty if they share Chira's (1998) belief that “A mother who never says, ‘No, I can't because this is my time now,’ is a mother who convinces children she lives only for them.” In reaction to Chira's statement, he wrote: “Funny. Not too long ago that was what a mother's love was supposed to be all about” (p. 40). His assumption appears to be that, to be a loving and effective mother, a woman can have no other personal interests or needs of her own. He does not comment if he believes this also is true for fathers. Nor does he recognize that simply being at home full-time does not guarantee that a parent will always be available for their children.

### *Empirical Data Against Societal Myths*

The dominant cultural discourse typically involves indictments about the dual-earner family arrangement, instead of focusing on how social ideologies and structural dynamics produce barriers for dual-earner couples in balancing family and work. As Coontz (2000) pointed out, “The privileges and disadvantages of any family form are socially constructed.” Not only does the cultural discourse about dual-earners as described above produce barriers for these families, but so too do the structure and norms of the U.S. economy and social systems (Barnett & Rivers, 1996). For instance, in many workplaces, norms continue to be structured around an assumption that paid employees have a full-time adult at home that takes care of all non-paid labor. Despite evidence that

they improve productivity and morale, many workplaces continue to resist the implementation of family-friendly options, such as flextime or on-site child care (Galinsky et al., 1996). However, even within a societal context that is generally not supportive of dual-earner families, many of these families are doing well (Barnett & Rivers, 1996; Galinsky, 1999).

Empirical research has debunked many of the societal myths and political discourse about dual-earner parenting practices. In comparing children's time diaries in two-parent families in 1981 and 1997, Sandberg and Hofferth (2001) found an increase in children's time with mothers and fathers, despite the fact that more two-parent families are dual-earners. This same research, conducted at the Population Studies Center at the Institute for Social Research, also revealed that a 1997 sample of employed mothers spent as much time with their children as stay-at-home moms who were studied in 1981. Additionally, Galinsky's (1999) landmark research investigated what a nationally representative sample of over 1,000 children from dual-earner, "traditional" (breadwinner father-homemaker mother) and single parent families think about their parents. Her findings shattered many common societal myths around dual-earner families and employed mothers. For instance, she found that mothers' employment did not predict whether or not children felt they had enough time with their mothers. The majority of children ages 8 through 18 felt that they had enough time with their employed parents. For those children who did not, it was adolescents more than younger children who wanted increased time with their parents, and it was with fathers—more than mothers—with whom they reported wanting more time. Similarly, more fathers than mothers felt that they did not have enough time with their children.

Research has found that maternal employment, in and of itself, does not diminish the mother-child relationship (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1997) or lessen the influence of parents on children (Fuligni, Galinsky, & Poris, 1995). Galinsky (1999) also found that having an employed mother was not predictive of how children assessed their mother's parenting skills on 12 different parenting items. Instead, researchers have found that the effect of maternal employment depends on a number of factors, such as parental attitudes about maternal employment, parental warmth and sensitivity, the quality of parents' jobs, and the quality of child care (Fuligni et al., 1995; Galinsky, 1999).

In summarizing the state of the empirical literature, Galinsky (1999) noted that researchers have begun to understand that "the problem isn't *that* mothers (and fathers) work: It is *how* [they] work" (Galinsky, 1999,

p. xiv). Given this, a new body of research is emerging (e.g., Edgell Becker & Moen, 1999; Moen & Wethington, 1992) that is focused neither on the problems or benefits of dual earning, but on understanding *how* couples describe their adaptive strategies (Edgell Becker & Moen, 1999). This research has at least two important implications. First, gaining a clearer picture of the daily lives and strategies of dual-earners may help reveal some of the exaggerations and distortions in the societal discourse around them. Second, the adaptive strategies of these couples may be beneficial to families (of all arrangements) who are struggling with work-family balance, as well as to the professionals who are charged with assisting them. The current study extends this body of research by documenting the parenting strategies of dual-earner couples who self-identify as successful in balancing family and work.

## METHOD

### Participants

All participant couples were residents in one of three cities in Colorado. A variety of methods were used to recruit participants. Recruitment efforts included distribution of fliers to parents of children in early childhood centers and public elementary and middle schools; articles appearing in two major daily newspapers; stories broadcast by two television news programs; posters displayed in a variety of retail shops, family activity centers, and large businesses and universities; e-mails distributed to employees of large businesses and universities; and distribution of postcards to alumni from a major university and members of the Women's Chamber of Commerce in this state.

Potential participants who expressed interest were screened during a 20-minute phone conversation to determine eligibility. Couples were considered eligible if:

- a. they were married,
- b. each spouse completed at least 35 hours per week of paid employment,
- c. the couple had at least one child 12 years of age or younger who resided with them at least half of the time, and
- d. both partners wanted to participate in the study.

In addition, to participate in the study, couples had to agree with five statements defining successful work-family balance:

- a. My spouse and I experience more positives than negatives from the opportunity to fill both work and family responsibilities;
- b. My spouse and I believe that we are skilled in balancing the many responsibilities in our lives (e.g., spouse, parent, employee);
- c. My spouse and I have found and continue to find creative ways for balancing work and family;
- d. My spouse and I would be described as skilled in balancing work and family;
- e. My spouse and I believe we have quality and quantity time with each other and our children, and are mostly satisfied with our performance at work and home.

One limitation to this sample may be a socially-implied definition of success: While it was not a screening criteria to be “successful” financially and/or educationally, our sampling methods resulted in a high percentage of couples who were Caucasian, highly-educated, and financially secure. Therefore, it is important to recognize that the parenting practices found in this study may be limited to this sample’s demographics.

Forty-seven couples participated in the study. Although more couples expressed interest in the study, 50 were ineligible primarily because of demographic considerations (e.g., not married, children older than 12). Additionally, five couples withdrew from the study following screening. The average age was 38 for women and 40 for men. The couples had an average of 2 children, ranging in age from 6 months to 23 years of age. The average age of the youngest child was 5 years old and the average age of the oldest was 9 years old. The average length of marriage for the couples was 12.75 years.

Combined incomes ranged from \$34,000 to \$220,000 with a median income of \$105,000 ( $M = \$105,022$ , excluding two atypically high incomes). Women earned a median income of \$45,000 ( $M = 45,000$ ) and men’s median income was \$54,000 ( $M = 63,320$ ), with a range of \$10,000 to \$105,000 for women, and \$20,000 to \$190,000 for men.

The occupations of the participants were diverse; they included baker, billing clerk, construction worker, engineer, firefighter, grocery clerk, housekeeper, lawyer, machine operator, minister, musician, nurse, teacher, truck driver, and professor. The wives in the study worked an average of 40 hours a week; husbands worked an average of 45.

Of the individual participants, 77 identified as Caucasian, 8 as Hispanic-American, 4 as African-American, 1 as Asian-American, 1 as Caucasian-Native American, and 1 as “Other.” Participants attained relatively high levels of education, with the average participant complet-

ing some graduate study. In terms of highest level of education completed, 5 individual participants graduated from high school, 13 attended some college, 27 graduated from college, 7 attended some graduate study, and 40 attained graduate degrees.

### *Procedure*

Participant couples completed a conjoint interview of approximately 90 minutes, which was primarily conducted in participants’ homes. Couples received \$30 as compensation for their participation. The interview followed a semi-structured format, including open-ended questions that explored the philosophies and strategies that contributed to the couple’s overall success. Examples of questions include:

- a. What are the primary factors that contribute to your successful balance of family and work?
- b. Do you have philosophies that are central to the way in which you manage family and work responsibilities, and if so, what are they?
- c. What are some of the strategies that you use at home and at work to successfully balance family and work?

### *Data Analysis*

A grounded theory approach was adopted for analysis of the qualitative interview data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Consistent with grounded theory method, an inductive, cross-case strategy was utilized. All members of the research team carefully read each interview transcript to identify themes and patterns. Using a qualitative data analysis program, Atlas/ti (Muhr, 1997), one researcher coded each information fragment in the first 12 interviews, using a process commonly referred to as first-level coding. The first-level codes were then organized around common ideas or concepts, and three researchers completed the remainder of the transcripts. During this process, emergent themes were identified (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Four strategies were used to enhance validity and trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell, 1998). First, we clarified biases, perspectives, and orientations that we likely brought to our research. As family therapists, we have approached this study from a perspective shaped by feminist social philosophy and family systems theory. Second, we adopted a team approach to data analysis and used peer evaluations. Third, we used ATLAS.ti to allow us to create an online audit trail. Fourth, we

have made an effort to offer a rich, detailed description of the findings. The data analysis and strategies to enhance validity are described in more detail in a previous manuscript (Haddock, Zimmerman, Ziemba, & Current, 2001).

## RESULTS

Data analysis revealed four dominant themes in how the couples described their parenting strategies. Their descriptions revealed that they were proactive in defining their values about parenting. They also were attentive and available as parents, developing and modifying the family's daily routines in ways that adapted to the needs of all family members, particularly children. The couples were committed to working towards shared responsibility for parenting and meeting the needs of their children. Finally, the couples were able to create and/or access support from their workplaces and/or extended family that served to facilitate their family's well-being.

### *Clarified Values About Parenting*

Parents in this study were able to easily articulate several values that guided their parenting practices. It was apparent that they had devoted time and thought to clarifying their personal values and to discussing them as a couple. Although respondents acknowledged the influence of their own upbringing on their value systems, parents did not simply follow their childhood model, but instead made conscious decisions about what they wanted to emulate and what they wanted to do differently.

Mother: I had a dichotomy of a working father who never talked about the work that he did and a mother who stayed home and only talked about all the work she did. So, for me, knowing that my kids will have a different outlook and different opportunities—much of which stem from the fact that I work—is a real advantage.

Although each couple had values specific to their parenting, there were several values that were shared by the majority of the sample. These were: the priority of family, and the importance of teaching children gender-flexible expectations, responsibility, and independence.

Most striking was the emphasis that virtually all couples placed on maintaining family as the most important part of their lives, with many

stating that their children were their first priority. This emphasis did not mean that the participants thought work unimportant, but that it was clearly secondary to their family and children. Additionally, in order to have sufficient, unhurried family time, they limited their own number of activities, as well as those of their children (scouts, soccer, piano, etc.). Many families described actively deciding as a family how many personal activities seemed reasonable in order to still have sufficient family time.

Father: The family is definitely the number one thing. . . . While both of our careers are important to us, how our careers affect the family is most important.

The majority of participants indicated that they were teaching their children to behave in nonstereotypical ways in terms of gender.

Father: I never want my girls to say they can't do something or that boys do things better, or for [my son] to say that he can't do something because it's "girl's work." I never want to hear that. We don't encourage that type of thought in our family.

A common way that parents instilled the value of flexible gender expectations was through role modeling.

Mother: This is just a very egalitarian relationship . . . that is what they are seeing and growing up with. . . . We love it, so I hope that they will.

The majority of participants indicated that teaching their children to handle responsibilities, particularly family responsibilities, was important to them. To instill the value of responsibility, many parents expected children to help with household chores.

Mother: It's a team effort for all of us. We all share responsibilities at the house. My daughter helps us do laundry, and one evening we'll all clean house before we go to bed.

Participant couples also commonly mentioned the importance of teaching their children independence. These parents wanted their children to be able to handle age-appropriate responsibilities.

Father: It's a system we put in place so they can be in charge of things—they use plastic [dishes] . . . so if they drop them or what-

ever, [it's] no big deal. The cereal is near the bottom . . . the milk . . . the toaster . . . all that stuff's down there. It's organized so it's easier for them to get to.

### *Attentive and Available as Parents*

Although the couples' lives were full, their commitment to making their family and children the top priority went beyond the discussion of values into their daily actions. They used many strategies to be attentive and available as parents: scheduling regular family times, spending one-on-one time with each child, developing daily rituals and routines, and remaining flexible and adaptable to meet children's daily and unique needs. Couples also discussed the importance of ensuring they had time together to nurture the couple relationship as well as individual time for rejuvenation.

Virtually all couples scheduled regular family times when they engaged in fun activities to nurture family closeness. The majority of the parents reported that their family did most things as a unit, thereby further maximizing the time they had together.

Mother: We like to have fun with our kids, and we're willing to jump in and do things with them, like go to their movies.

Parents used a number of methods to minimize other endeavors so that they could maximize the time they had with their children.

Mother: I can stress out about having the house perfectly spotless or I can enjoy my kids while they're young. . . . So we just play with the kids and watch them grow up and . . . little toys on the floor aren't going to kill you.

The majority of the parents also scheduled regular one-on-one time with each child, allowing them to create personal relationships with their children.

Mother: Another thing we do is that we try to give each of the kids some one-on-one time with an adult. My daughter and I will do "date day." My husband and daughter started going on bike rides. They take the bikes out, find a different trail, which gives me time to take a nap with my son.

Participants reported creating morning, after school, and bedtime routines that reduced the time they needed for necessary tasks, created time for closeness, and added a sense of structure to their and the children's day. For the vast majority of the parents, planning was an important part of their lives.

Mother: We're organized enough that the kids know exactly what has to be done. It's such a routine . . . it's the same thing everyday.

However, participants also found that they had to be flexible about these routines as unplanned events are inevitable in any household with children. The parents stressed the importance of following their children's lead in appropriate situations.

Father: It's all about communication; it's always trying to decide what we want to do. Sometimes we joke that we're like that scene in the *Jungle Book* when the vultures are going, "What do you want to do, what do you want to do?"

Parents also mentioned being attentive to and adapting to their children's daily rhythms, and noticing the individual and changing needs of each individual child.

Father: It's very deliberately respecting the kids as individuals. I give them a lot of space, allowing them to be themselves.

Although participants focused a great deal of the attention to their children, they also frequently mentioned the importance of having time together as a couple. Although the majority of couples scheduled couple time, about half of them mentioned wanting even more time with one another. It seems as though having nurturing couple and individual time contributed to the couple's ability to be available and attentive parents. Finally, parents made sure that they each had some individual time to help rejuvenate themselves; this time was often enjoyed when the children were asleep or when the other parent was spending some one-on-one time with the children.

### *Working as a Team*

One of the most dominant themes from data analysis was that these couples worked as a team. Communication was believed to be a key to

their efforts, and in particular, with regard to coordinating the children's activities.

Father: Probably the biggest thing for us is communication—it all revolves around communication . . . as far as working out who will pick our son up, [etc.]

Partners were also sensitive to one another's needs, turned to one another for support, and provided extra effort when the other needed a break. This attention to each other's needs and willingness to lend a hand further shows the level of teamwork these parents demonstrated.

Father: Usually, one of us will sleep in . . . until 8:00 or occasionally . . . [mother "9:00!"] We'll take turns. . . . Some days I just feel like waking up and some days my wife does. And we'll get up with the kids.

These couples were committed to achieving equality in their parenting practices; there was evidence that mothers tended to spend slightly more time in child care and took a primary role in the organization and planning of activities, in particular keeping the family calendar (Zimmerman, Haddock, Current, & Rust, 2002).

Mother: I take the mother role and think more. I think that's just what women do. You think about where your kids are at, where you're at, where your husband's at. And that's something that women seem to handle better. But my husband is always ready, willing, and able to be a part of the planning.

### *Supportive Extended Family and Work Environments*

The majority of parents benefited from the support of both their workplaces and their extended families. They created and were fortunate to have work situations that were conducive to maintaining family as their priority and relied on extended family, when available.

In terms of their work situations, the majority of parents had flexible work situations that allowed them to maintain a high level of parental involvement, and the majority of them deliberately chose jobs that fit their family needs.

Father: I had an opportunity to go for a fairly good promotion in South Dakota, but I turned it down. We both turned our jobs into being how they could suit our needs as the children grew older.

Many of the families had extended family relatively close by, and they found that their family's help reduced the stress involved in being a parent. Additionally, some couples developed support for their role as parents.

Mother: I believe very strongly in establishing a sense of community, not just for me, but for the kids. And if I don't know parents and I don't know kids, then I'm not doing my part in allowing our family to become a part of the community. Community helps us do everything.

## **DISCUSSION**

The implications of this study should be addressed within the context of the study's limitations. As mentioned, the couples who participated in this study were, for the most part, financially secure, highly educated, Caucasian, and were employed at workplaces that offered support for balancing family and work. It also is important to remember in interpreting the findings that, to participate in the study, couples had to describe themselves as successful in balancing family and work and that both partners had to agree to participate (agreement by both wives and husbands could in itself imply a certain level of partnership). Although the results cannot be generalized to all dual-earners, the purpose of the project was to explore *how* these couples successfully balance work and family.

While it is clear that the couples in this study were creative, proactive, and flexible in creating a dual-earner lifestyle that works, often their success appeared to be dependent on contextual factors and responsive workplaces. It is important to recognize that dual-earners who struggle in balancing family and work may share parenting values and practices similar to these couples, yet may struggle because they do not have as much support. In working with dual-earner couples who are struggling with work-family balance, therapists must recognize that solutions may not lie solely in couples' ability to adopt and implement certain values and strategies. Certainly, dual-earners need to be active agents in creating a successful balance of family and work; at the same time, however, it is important to recognize that their agency may be limited by outdated societal ideologies, workplace practices, and/or contextual factors, such as oppression based on gender, race, class, and sexual orientation. Therapists need to address not only parenting values and practices with cli-



ents struggling with work-family balance, but also ways to improve or manage constraining contextual-factors, when possible.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that couples who have less supportive contexts than the participants of this study may be just as successful in balancing family and work and raising children as were these participants. Evidence exists from random national samples that while 58% of parents report at least some conflict in managing family and work (Galinsky, Bond, & Friedman, 1996), most parents with children under the age of 18 report being at least somewhat successful in managing work and family life (Galinsky, 1999). It is our hope that this study will be replicated with couples in noncareer positions and those from lower-income groups.

The findings of this study indicate the family lives of these participants did not reflect the myths that saturate the cultural discourse about these families. For instance, the dual-earner lifestyle did not result in these participants being neglectful of their children, as the media would lead us to believe. In fact, the majority of these parents talked about their families as the most important part of their lives, with children having priority over their careers. Parents talked about spending one-on-one time with each of their children, creating daily routines to give their children structure and create opportunities for closeness, and adapting to the unique needs and rhythms of their children.

These parents also do not fit the current concerns about parents disregarding their marriage in an effort to meet the needs of their children (Doherty, 2001). In recent years, marriage counselors and educators have cautioned parents on becoming too child-focused at the expense of their marital intimacy (Everett & Everett, 2000). A common stereotype is of overworked parents who don't have time for one another; however, couples in this study frequently mentioned making sure they had time as a couple. This finding has been replicated by other research; for instance, Schwartz (1994) found that equal dual-earning couples frequently described each other as best friends. They also referred to utilizing a team approach in parenting, being sensitive to one another's needs, and turning to one another for support. Instead of the mythic, overworked couple who pass like ships in the night, these couples reported a commitment to marital intimacy and vitality.

In the media discourse on work-family balance, equality is rarely mentioned as a strategy. However, for these couples, equality was the foundation of their success. Equal sharing of parenting responsibilities relieved the wife and mother of having the majority of the child-care responsibilities. This in turn facilitated more time together as a family and

allowed each child to have more individualized attention. In addition, because the wife was not constantly focused on meeting the children's needs, she had more time to play with the children, the couple had more time together, and the wife, in addition to the husband, had time alone.

Because these couples worked together as a team, they also remained more flexible and adaptable to meet the daily needs and the needs of their children. As reported previously, couples reported daily negotiations of child responsibilities such as transportation, meals, morning and evening routines—and the ability to cover for one another if the day's events changed unexpectedly. They also reported regularly evaluating and reevaluating their arrangements in order to ensure that it was best meeting the needs of everyone in the family.

Finally, couples were able to choose supportive services that facilitated balance and well-being in their families. As discussed, the current societal milieu is not supportive of dual-earner family configurations, yet these couples were able to create their own social support networks. Although they relied heavily on one another, they also chose work environments that allowed their family to remain top priority and sought help from nearby extended family. In addition, many participants mentioned fostering a sense of community, for their own well-being and that of their children.

### CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study has particular relevance for therapists and parent educators. The results suggest that, contrary to what the media implies, it is possible for dual-earners to achieve balanced, fulfilling family lives. Dual-earners are a primary family configuration in the United States and family professionals can potentially be an important resource for those dual-earner families (or any type of family) struggling to achieve a more balanced lifestyle. Due to negative societal messages, dual-earners can have a particularly difficult time assessing whether or not they are “doing a good job” as parents, and it is expected that family professionals could help to facilitate an objective evaluation of parenting practices. However, a recent research study has revealed that many family therapists are unaware of the empirical literature on dual-earners, and instead often inadvertently perpetuate societal myths and media images (Haddock & Bowling, 2002). In responding to a clinical vignette of a dual-earner family, therapists tended to hold the employed mother more responsible for the family's problem—not unlike the way the media directs the brunt of its negative images regarding dual-earners directly at working mothers. In the Haddock and Bowling study,

many therapists failed to provide any empirical research regarding the working mother's guilt associated with using day-care, nor did they address the couple's inequities in parenting labor. In addition, the majority of therapists did not list any resources they would recommend to the couple regarding work-family balance, dual-earner families, working mothers, or equitable marriages (Haddock & Bowling, 2002). Thus, the present study provides important information for many therapists operating under the common misconceptions regarding dual-earner families.

The present study also provides family professionals with ideas for intervention. Dual-earner couples need to be educated about the societal myths around dual-earner families and the contrasting empirical literature regarding its effects on children. Family professionals need to help couples assess their parenting practices, and explore their values and beliefs regarding parenting. Couples could be encouraged to use aspects of their own upbringing to inform their parenting as well as to explore other models. Perhaps the most crucial aspect of this values exploration is an evaluation of the division of child-care labor and a discussion of the benefits of equally-shared parenting (Deutsch, 1999).

As couples work toward a team parenting effort, they can be encouraged to remain flexible and adaptable, trying out different daily arrangements in order to meet the needs of their children and of one another. The schedules of the workplace and of children are rarely static, and thus parenting practices and labor divisions need to be flexible. Finally, couples can be encouraged to make informed and deliberate choices, when possible, regarding work, day-care, and other support networks so as to facilitate a high level of parental involvement. Therapists can brainstorm specific strategies to help couples put into practice their parenting beliefs and values, while also helping couples realize both the limitations of and possibilities for change within their important environments (e.g., workplaces, day-cares, extended family relationships).

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