



# Alfred P. Sloan Center Newsletter

At the University of Chicago  
June, 2001

Volume 1, Number 2

## Gone to Data Files, Every One...

The dust and cobwebs collecting on our supply of tape recorders and microphones are just one of the many tell-tale signs that we have taken a break from data collection for the Sloan Working Families Study. We officially ended our data collection in summer of 2000, and at that point we had managed to speak with people from 535 families around the United States. For many months, our tape recorders and beeping watches have taken a long-needed break, but we have not. We thought you might like to know a little bit about the many ways we have been processing the information your family generously provided us when we visited you so many months ago.

The tapes of your voices have been logged and stored away in a special cassette tape cabinet – a respite for them as they await transcription. A large number of the interview tapes have already been transcribed. If your interview with us lasted about an hour, it takes us about 4-6 hours to transcribe it, and when it is printed out it will produce about 40 pages of text! As the interviews are transcribed, we assign new names (or “pseudonyms”) to all of the members of your family and friends mentioned in the interview, as well as the town that you live in and the names of your workplaces and schools. We have really had to be creative to think of unique names for all of the people and places mentioned in the 1,492 hours of audiotape we recorded.

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*We have 1,492  
hours of audio-  
tape!*

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The surveys and daily beep journals that your family completed have been coded, coded, and coded again. Each response that you provided was reviewed, coded and/or checked by at least 4 trained coders. During this process we assigned numeric codes to all of your responses about where you were, what you were doing, and what you were thinking about. For instance, we assigned codes to your answers that told us that you were by yourself, with your spouse, with your children or with other people; if you were multi-tasking or doing just the one thing; if you were talking to each other about current events, watching T.V., or just knitting a shawl by the fire, etc. By the end of the coding process we had developed a whole new way of communicating based on the codes we assigned to your responses. For example, coders would jokingly respond to the question “What did you do this

weekend?” by saying “Saturday I was at 70, but then Sunday I went to the 87 to do some 327, then I 340. (Translation: *Saturday I was at home, but then Sunday I went to the mall to do some shopping, then I talked to my mother on the phone*).

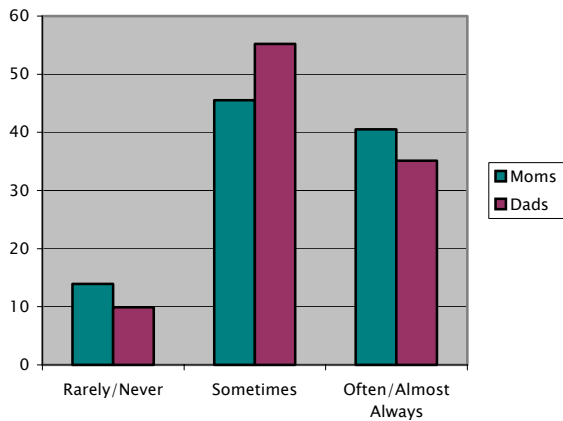
Once all of your responses to the surveys and daily beep journals were coded, we began the long task of entering all responses into a database so they can be accessed electronically. In addition to the surveys you completed, we entered data from approximately 45,000 pages in the daily beep journals. The process of coding and entering all of this information was just completed at the beginning of 2001. Our task for the past several months has been to look for patterns in participants’ responses and to explore the many intricacies of this extraordinary data set. In the pages that follow, we present some of these findings. ♦

# Work and Family: The Balancing Act

As you know, one of the primary goals of our 500 Family Study was to understand how people today balance the many demands presented by work and family. We spent a lot of time talking with parents and children about work-family conflict and balance, and you all had a lot to say on this matter. Here we present responses provided by parents to survey questions about how work and family intersect in their lives.

Not surprisingly, parents with careers often find that the demands of their work lives conflict with their commitments to their families. Figure 1 shows that fully 40.5% of mothers and 35% of fathers find that their jobs and their family life come into conflict often or almost all the time. Around half of all moms and dads report that work and family sometimes conflict. A very small proportion of parents – only about 10% – feel that they rarely or never experience conflict between their work and family life.

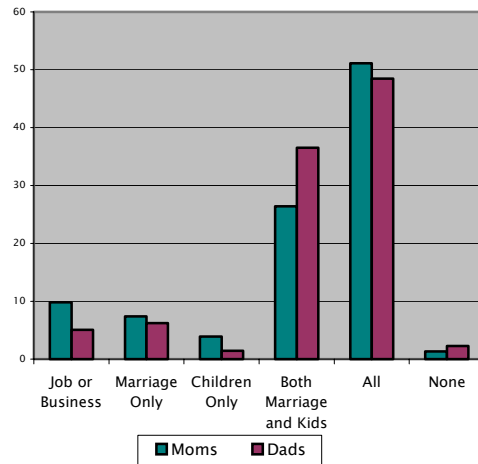
**Figure 1.**  
Frequency of Work-Family Conflict



When such conflicts occur—when the boss asks a mom or dad to work late, or when a parent has a deadline on a project—families must make tradeoffs, short-changing either the job or the family.

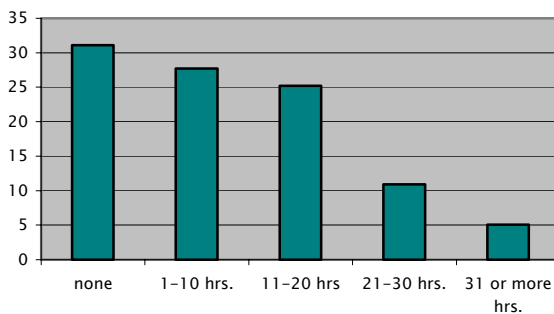
Parents in the Sloan study reported more often than not, that when work conflicts with family, everything suffers: Figure 2 shows that about half of all moms and dads feel that when work and family come into conflict, their spouse, their children, and their job all get slighted. While most parents report that the repercussions of work-family conflict are spread across work and home life, a large number of moms and dads report that it is mostly family life that suffers. Twenty six percent of mothers and 37% of fathers say that when work and family conflict, it is their marriages and relationships with their children that lose out to their jobs.

**Figure 2.**  
What Gets Slighted



Parents of young children face a unique set of issues regarding the balance between work and family life. While teenage children can occasionally “fend for themselves” if they are at home while their parents are at work, younger children require more constant direct supervision. Parents of younger children are not able to leave their kids alone before or after school to look after themselves or to participate in extra-curricular activities. Among parents who had five- and six-year old children, the use of childcare was a common strategy for balancing the demands of work and family. In Figure 3, we see that a majority (68%) of five- and six-year-old children spends at least some time each week in childcare. Most of the children in our sample spend fewer than 20 hours per week in childcare, but a considerable proportion (15%) spend more than 20 hours each week in some form of childcare.

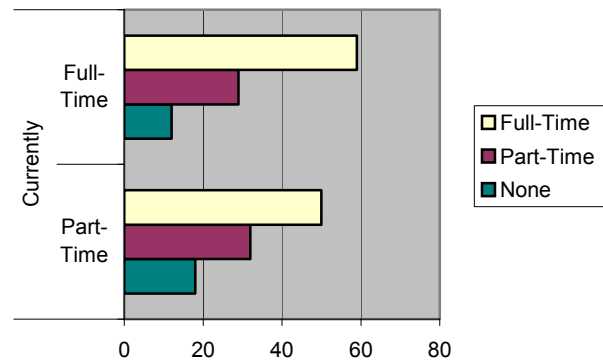
**Figure 3.**  
**Hours Spent in Child Care**



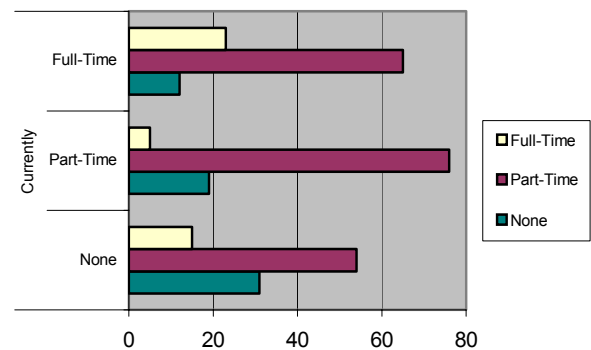
We suspect that all of these work – family conflicts may in part contribute to the desire of many mothers in our study to change their work status to part time.

Figure 4 shows that most fathers, even those currently working part time, prefer to hold a full time job. Most mothers, on the other hand, appear to desire part-time work. Nearly two-thirds of moms who currently work full time would rather be working part time. Even among mothers who are not currently working for pay, one-third would prefer to work part-time over not working at all. We believe that this desire is in no small part due to the conflicts of work and family that many mothers experience.

**Figure 4.**  
**Dads' Work Preferences**



**Figure 5.**  
**Moms' Work Preferences**



The fact that so many of the mothers in our study would prefer to work part time – even those who are not currently working for pay – suggests that more attention needs to be focused on opportunities for part-time work in America. Many mothers in our study feel that they have only two employment options – to work full time or not at all – but it appears that many moms would like to find some sort of middle ground.

One of the Center’s goals over the next few years is to think about how to develop policies that allow parents to establish career paths that include opportunities for more meaningful and better paying part-time work. ♦

## Looking Ahead

The Sloan Center has many projects on the horizon that may interest you. First and foremost, we will continue to analyze the data we collected from families. The families that participated in our study helped us create one of the richest sources of data on work and family, and there are still many unanswered questions. The data will allow us to look at work and family in exciting new ways for years to come. There are several projects underway that will enable us to share our findings with the general public. In the next few months we hope to release the first in a series of reports on our findings. These reports will be shared with the academic community, the media, corporations, policymakers, and of course the families who so generously shared their lives with us over the course of the study.

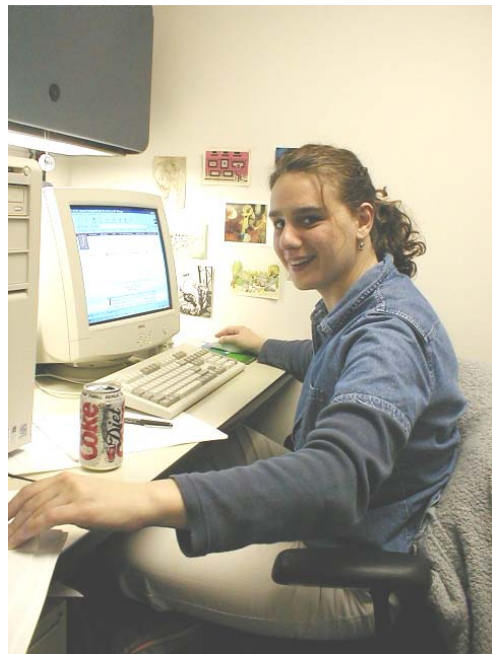
A second project that is underway is a book, edited by Barbara Schneider and Linda Waite, the co-directors of our Center. This book will feature chapters on a variety of work-family topics including housework, stress, marital satisfaction, and children's expectations for the future. The chapters will be written by graduate students and post-doctoral fellows (many of whom were out in your homes conducting interviews, so you may see some familiar names). This book is currently underway, but because the publication process is so slow, we don't anticipate that it will be available for at least another year. We will notify you when the book comes out.

In the meantime, we will continue to present our work at conferences, and will write articles for publication in academic journals and in the popular press.

As is often the case in research, our 500 Family Study has not only allowed us to address many of our original questions about how people manage work and family today, but has helped us to formulate new questions as well. As a result of our conversations with parents and children, we have identified a few issues that we were not able to address in detail in the original study but that emerged as very important issues to explore further. One such issue is physiological stress.

We have become interested in what effects work and family demands have on physiological responses and physical health. Another area of interest is how parents decide whether to pay for household services like housecleaning, grocery shopping etc, and which services they chose to purchase. We are interested in pursuing a few of these questions in greater detail with a number of families. We may be in touch with your family again at some point in the next few months to see if you would be willing to talk with us further about one of these specific issues.

We will continue to share our work with you as more information becomes available. As always, thanks for your cooperation and for your interest in our study. ♦



*Graduate Student Alisa Ainbinder hard at work.*

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