

Silent Exchanges:
Quality Time in Dual-Earner Families

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Mom is rushing trying to pack her office materials at home while getting her two young daughters ready (for the sitter, presumably). She's on her cell phone, setting up a meeting with a client, when her 4 year old asks here "Mommy, when do we get a meeting?" A realization comes over mom, and the next scene shows the girls excited because mom is taking the day "off" to spend with them at the beach. Only, when they show them at the beach, you don't see mom building sandcastles with her daughters, or splashing in the ocean. No, mom can be seen working on her files and talking on a cell phone. The wireless technology company totes the ability to handle both roles at once. - Commercial for wireless technology

A working mother at her office is shown looking through files, updating her palm pilot, and packing her briefcase at the end of a workday. As she leaves her office, the camera pans back to a child's drawing hanging on the mother's office wall. The drawing is of the mother, with her daughter's hand in one hand, and a briefcase in the other. The commercial's caption reads "When you get home, will your head be here [pointing to the figure of the daughter], or here [pointing to the briefcase]?" – Commercial for Investment Company

INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW

The commercials described above are only two of the many cultural expressions of the dilemma many parents are facing when it comes to work and family; time is a precious commodity and parents are struggling to find an equitable distribution of time across the two arenas. In general, scholars have noted a growth in hours spent on paid employment, and a decline in leisure time that parallels the trend over the latter half of the 20th century (Schor 1992)—although such trends may more aptly describe the experiences of certain segments of the population (i.e. professionals, dual-earner families, and single headed-households) (Jacobs and Gerson 1998). More specifically, family scholars have become concerned about the effects of work on the quantity and quality of family time.

National figures suggest that parents' experiences with work-family conflict may have heightened feelings of not having enough time with family. According to the GSS (1988-1991), although the majority of adults feel that they are successful in both their family life and work life, less than 40 percent feel that they are very successful at balancing paid work and family life. This likely reflects a concern about not spending enough time with family members, since more than eighty percent of adults feel that parents need to spend more time with their children.

A time paradox

Despite the rather wide-spread belief that parents are not spending enough time with their children, demographic trends over the past few decades suggest that parents are spending about the same—if not more—time with their kids. Using multi-national data, Sullivan and Gershuny (2001) show that compared to the 1960s, mothers and fathers in the 1980s were (respectively) spending approximately 11 and 7 more minutes per day engaged in childcare activities. Similarly, Sandberg and Hofferth (2001) compare time use data from 1981 and 1997 and find

that changes in the demographic composition of the U.S. population (such as proportion of women in the labor force, and number of single-headed households) should have resulted in sharp decreases in the number of hours parents are accessible to their children. Their data, however, show slight increases in the number of hours spent with children, and the authors contend that parental behavior compensate for structural effects. Research by Bianchi and her colleagues (2000) also found that the amount of time parents spend with children has remained relatively stable over the past few decades, and speculate that such stability in the face of increasing maternal labor force participation stems from a mother's practice of 'shedding load' in other areas—including housework, volunteer work, and personal pursuits—in order to safeguard time with her children.

Why then this feeling of not having enough time to spend with family members?

One reason may have to do with the way our experience of time in general has changed. Although time has quantitative properties, these are generally products of convention (LaRossa 1983 ala Daly 1986). Because time is a social construction, it is subject to social, demographic, and historical forces. For instance, Robinson and Godbey (1997) provide an historical account of how our experience of time has changed over the last two centuries. They describe how the clock, with its ever increasing precision from adding a minute hand and then the sweeping second hand, was instrumental in creating a time-bound and organized life for peasants during the industrial revolution. But the impact was felt by more than just those on the factory floor. For industrialism to succeed, employers and managers reasoned, it was necessary to "promote the personal values essential for a growing commercial economy: self-control, family values, and 'respectability' (p. 31). Consequently, many reformers, intending to socialize the working class for industrial work conditions, used the arena of leisure to do so. To 'mimic' the organization of

activities on the factory floor, reformers sought to transform leisure activities from being public and spontaneous, to being highly ordered and planned.

While industrialization brought changes to the organization of both work and leisure, our sensitivity to time-shortages may have stemmed from the advent of scientific management. In the late 1800s, Frederick Taylor introduced to us the various dimensions of time as it pertained to factory work: sequence, duration, schedule, rhythm, synchronization and time perspective. Since then, the logic of ‘efficiency’ has permeated to all aspects of our lives as we increasingly strive to do more with less. Today, appliances are touted as being both timing saving devices and energy efficient. On the highway, tollbooths are replaced by ‘EZ-pass’ cameras to move traffic along. Fast food restaurants make more investments in drive through windows than in booths and tables for sit-down clientele. And of course, it’s not just cultural objects which reflect our country’s preoccupation with time. We’ve developed a language that reflects that time has value. We “spend” it, “save” it, “invest” it, and are appalled if we “waste” or “lose” it.

Today, of course, technology has changed our experience of time considerably. Advances in technology certainly appear to have loosened the bonds which kept persons tethered to specific localities (a la cell phones, portable computers etc.), supposedly easing the struggle that parents face in balancing their work and family roles. But the computer itself has enabled a division of time that is beyond even human perception. This can be attested to the fact that often it is not our eyes that tell us who the victor of a race is, but rather a camera with an automatic stopwatch. If time can be measured in terms of nanoseconds, one billionth of a second, then surely something is meant to happen within it. As a society begins to run on a clock in which finer and finer measurements of time become important, then the possibilities of what can

happen within those fractions of time begin to seem endless. Further, the computer's ability to multitask—to work on numerous 'problems' at one time—becomes a new model for efficiency.

Robinson and Godbey (1997) observe that the focus on time has left many people, especially in America, feeling “rushed,” feeling constantly as if time is beyond their control (p. 35-37). People have adapted by adopting “time-deepening” behavior. As the authors describe it, this behavior is based on the belief that people are cable of increasing their rate of “doing”—that is, more could be done in the same amount of time. Thus, persons engage in time-deepening behavior by speeding up activities, opting for activities that take less time, multi-tasking, and engaging in leisure activities with a strict observance to time.

The Time Famine Today

How has all of this come to bear on family life, and particularly, family time today?

As noted earlier, there is a paradox of parents feeling a shortage of time with children, yet findings suggest very little change in the amount of time parents are actually spending with children. The overview on how time is being experienced, both in terms of work and leisure, suggests that the shortage which parents report may stem from something regarding how the *nature* of time spent with children and family members measures up against the *ideal*. If our desire to be “more efficient” has gone beyond our work activities and become the logic for our leisure activities as well (as Robinson and Godbey have argued), does this have implications for the way we define and experience family time?

This brings our attention to a distinction between quantity and quality in terms of family time. ‘Quality time’ is certainly a term that we have seen used often in the media, and even in research circles, but our understanding of it and most importantly how families define it, is vague at best. If we look up ‘quality’ in the dictionary, we find that that it is its third and fourth

definitions which seem to apply when used in the phrase “quality time”: superiority of kind; high social position (The American Heritage College Dictionary). Thus, it is clearly an evaluative phrase, suggesting that this time is distinct from other times in some fundamentally “good” way.

But *what* makes it *good*?

Is it the place in which this time is spent; the fact that it is an “other place” different from work or daily routine? Is it the activities that make it distinct; the fact that we are engaging in activities that are not part of our productive work life? Is it our attitudes toward those activities? That is, that they are activities of choice, rather than obligation? Is it because of the persons involved and our feelings toward them; that they are surrounded by persons from whose interaction with we derive pleasure? Or Is it the emotions had in that span of time; The fact that we are having “fun”?

It appears that, facing a shortage of time, families may be trying to “get more” out of the time spent together. But what exactly are families looking to ‘get more’ of?

To better understand the nature of family time (that is, time shared with one or more family members) this paper will examine how parents and their adolescent children describe it, both as an experience and as an ideal. As researchers, we often believe that terms such as “family time” or “quality time” are simple and have a universal meaning (for one exception, see Daly (2001), who examined the meaning of family time in a handful of families). But indeed, such terms may mean different things to different families, and may even have different meanings for different *members* of the same family.

We may also often think of quality time in terms of parental time spent with fairly young children (reading stories, playing games, etc.), and arguably so, since it has been found that the time parents spend with children decreases dramatically over the adolescent years (Bryant &

Zick, 1996). This should come as no surprise since older children require less adult supervision, become self-sufficient, and likely acquire other outlets for socialization. But it is precisely because of this that adolescents' reports of family time are significant. Compared to small children, adolescents have more freedom to choose how to spend their time, can reflect on how family time is distinct from other sorts of time, and can provide the researcher with evaluative statements. Further, they are better able to fit their impressions within an historical context, in terms of personal, family and cultural history. That is, they can tell us: how things have changed as they've grown older, how family circumstances may have influenced relationships and time use, or how cultural changes may have impacted the options of how to use time.

METHOD

The data used in this paper come from parents who participated in the Alfred P. Sloan Study on working families conducted at the University of Chicago and NORC. Participants in the study were drawn from 8 middle- and upper middle class communities throughout the United States and were solicited through local public high schools and elementary schools. For each family, both resident parents and at least one child were recruited for the study. Data collection methods included surveys, semi-structured interviews and ESMs (experience sampling method used to record activities throughout the day). Approximately 500 families participated, 300 of them having an adolescent (between the ages of 12 and 18) still living in the home.

The analyses for this paper are conducted on the interview data from a sub-sample¹ of families with adolescent children. The interviews of 48 dads, 48 moms, and 47 adolescents were analyzed. All interviews were coded and analyzed using Atlas.ti5, and selection into the sample

¹ From here on out, this sub-sample is referred to as "the sample".

was based on whether a coded survey was available. (A complete list of codes used in analyzing the interviews appears in the appendix.). Basic demographic information (age, number of children, and number of work hours) are pulled from parent surveys (usually the mothers’).

The parents in this study were highly educated (more than 50% of wives and husbands held at least a Master's Degree); their incomes ranged from middle to upper class (wives’ average salary=\$44,000; husbands’=\$74,000); and their average family size was 4.5. Less than 4% of the parents in this sample had children under the age of 5 living in the home, and the average age for their teenager participating in the study was 15 ½².

Analyses were conducted in two major stages. First, parental and adolescent interviews were examined to see how quality time was defined. This analysis revealed some rather surprising results regarding issues about quality vs. quantity. Second, their discourse of experiences regarding shared family time is analyzed to see as to whether such experiences met their ideals.

RESULTS

Quantity vs. Quality

For many parents, there is a notion of how “most people” define quality time. There is that most people place a great deal of emphasis on planned activities and expensive trips. Parents contrast their own views against it by stressing how quality time need not be an elaborate affair. One father states: “Well, I think it means something different to other people than it does to me. A lot of people define it as taking your child on a vacation or doing something really special for your child. I’m not sure I would quantify that as quality time.” (2 kids, 46-50hrs, 101801)

² The average age of adolescents with coded interviews was closer to 17.

Many parents reject the term outright, stressing instead the importance of quantity.

See, I think that's a bunch of bunk. Time, is what matters. If we can all go to dinner one night; it's wonderful. Just, being here. Just, being in the same house to me, is quality time. You don't have to be doing something to make it quality time. If you're spending time together, that's all that matters.

-- Mom, 2 kids, 26-37 hrs (103202)

I don't like the term. I don't believe in quality time. Quality time is a good thing but there's a lot to be said for just hanging out together and not talking about deep things but just sort of being together. I see the term quality time to be a rationalization in large part by people who wish they could or maybe don't want to spend as much actual time by the hour with their kids. I think actual time is important. Sometimes in the midst of the most mundane you'll have a conversation about God. You know you just never know when it will come up. So I think it's good to be together and to do mundane things together and see what comes out of it.

--Mom, 3 kids, 26-37 hrs (105602)

For many of these parents quality time is not necessarily defined by any structured activity. In fact, one mom points out that quality time “can’t exist in little half an hour and hour scheduled time slots.” She argues: “I think the idea of quality versus quantity time is impossible. It’s a myth because I think kids will come up with things when they’re concerned about it; it can’t be scheduled. And when it’s scheduled, it feels false.”

Some also strongly believe that the term is adopted by parents who want to ease the guilt of not spending time with their kids. Many of these parents expressed the sentiment that they were not fooling themselves into believing that they could make up for loss time by making grand gestures and constructing special moments.

I think it's a phrase that people have made up to justify their working away from the family, because I don't think there is such a thing. I think being with your children is being with your children. And how do you raise that time? It seems silly to me. Invented to ease people's guilt of not being with their kids as much...Right. It's all quality time. You're learning, and they're learning from you every time they're with you, not just because you take them to a museum. It's

all a learning process, and you need a lot of that, not just jam-packed weekends, going from art museum to art museum. So to me it's a silly concept.

--Mom, 4 kids, 38-45 hrs (101602)

I don't think we really use that term in our family. We try to do things and I don't think we necessarily delude ourselves, I mean what are you suppose to say 10 minutes of quality time is the equivalent of being with them all the time. And we're not delusional just busy. We try to spend some time with, you know that's actual devoted. I think the way I would actually define it is time that is for them as opposed to for us, or getting practical things done.

-- Mom, 2 kids, 38-45 hrs (202502)

This, of course, is not the way all families in the sample describe quality time. Some parents seem to embrace the very definition other parents seem to shun. While none of them mentioned keeping a *strict* schedule of planned activities, a number did express that quality time was doing something special, not simply being together passively. One mom explains:

I think it means spending time with the kids. Reading to them, taking them places, making it really conscious that we are doing stuff as a family. I think taking them places that are educational and talking about things and trying to explore things and making learning interesting and fun. Anything besides, sitting down in front of the television together. I don't think that's quality time.

-- Mom, 2 kids, 1-5 hrs (103502)

That parents may adopt new definitions of quality time as circumstances change is somewhat indicated in their description of actual experience. One father begins to give examples of how he and his family share quality time, but there is a realization that some of the more structured activities have become rarer because of diverging interests. He explains:

I think some of the best quality time is...certain vacation things we've done together..., there's another family we go up to Beaver Creek with, where we all spend a lot of time together and split up in various ways and have a lot of fun with each other and with them. Um... I think some of the nicer moments are the moments sitting around the dinner table, with company or without company, and just joking back and forth. And uh, you know, telling jokes or telling something funny that happened during the day and just taking those minutes to share something. Uh, those are usually fairly positive times. That to me is a good

quality time. Uh, because of the age that they're at right now, there aren't too many events that we go to together anymore because their interests are somewhat disparate for ours and there aren't too many bands that are around now that I'd like to go hear that they would.... So, you know, activity wise, other than athletic things, there aren't that many things that we share that I would call 'quality time'.

-- Dad, 2 kids, 38–45 hrs (100101)

Notice, however, how deeply engrained is a definition that also encompasses an “event” as part of the experience. Despite having stated that even casual interaction between family members is good quality time, his final assessment is that “other than athletic things, there aren't many things that we share that I would call ‘quality time.’”

Such seemingly contradictory statements reveal cultural pressures on the framing of experience. A number of families are quick to mention numerous vacations, special outings to restaurants, theaters, and amusement parks—and given our society's emphasis on consumerism, this may not be too surprising. However, as noted earlier, there are also many families that outright reject these as defining elements, in favor of the more interpersonal aspects of the moment—allowing for even the more routine aspects of daily life to qualify as quality time.

One father is fairly succinct in capturing that quality time comes in different flavors:

I think, well, I think there might be a couple of different kinds of quality time. I think from what I've already said about the dinner hour, I view that as quality time. But the quality there comes from communication, from having the time to talk, to listen, we kind of push the kids to listen to one another and, you know, to be part of a conversation. And I think there's a different kind of quality time which is sort of outings together, I mean doing something out of the house together. And that can range all the way from a trip to Hawaii, which was very much an investment in quality time for all of us. You know, taking all six people was a big investment and there would have been reasons, in a way, for some people not coming, but we were very anxious that everyone should come along together. All the way through to something like going to the movies together.”

-- Dad; 4 kids; 60+ hrs (100301)

Clearly, then, ‘quality time’ encompasses a whole range of activities. From a very planned, and long term event requiring financial investment (the family vacation), to the very ritualistic (attending religious services) to the sharing of time as something practical gets done (feeding the family.) At one point we may be prompted to say that an important part of quality time is that mental energies are concentrated on family members, as when this father explains that in his family, children aren’t allowed to read at the table, or listen to a walkman during the dinner hour. Yet at the same time, an outing to a movie, which primarily situates people in the same place, but doesn’t require that they communicate with each other, is also considered quality time. No doubt that a movie outing might also include discussion in anticipation of the movie, as well as a thorough review afterwards. But as the father states, it could be as simple as getting out of the house together—a clear break from the everyday. This range of definitions is reflected in many of the responses which parents and adolescents give when asked what quality time means to them.

What makes it so?

As noted earlier, some parents mention that an essential part of quality time is in the communication and the togetherness. As one dad puts it: “it’s camaraderie, maybe it’s just the warmth of that moment.” (2 kids; 38 – 45 hrs; 100101) His wife expresses a similar view: “it is being together and communicating. Talking, laughing, um...um...being together and being in touch with one another.” (16-25 hrs; 100102). There’s also a sense that it does not have to span a long amount of time:

just even if it’s fifteen minutes, it’s just that one-on-one eye contact reading the book, looking at the letter, looking at a map to find out where Kosovo is, uh, watching a cartoon on TV, uh watching CMT one video, it’s just that one-on-one, uh five, ten, fifteen minutes, it doesn’t have – in my opinion it doesn’t have to be hours, but it’s it’s just that, you know, “I love you, you’re very important to me,” you know, it’s that, it’s that exchange, even a silent exchange.

– Mom, 3 kids, 16–25 hrs (103302)

Another mom makes the point that it lies in the desire to be there, as opposed to an obligation.

My definition of quality time...is time that people choose to be together, not because people say you haven't been together...I think it's time, quality time is when two people choose to be together. But it has nothing to do with anybody else. And people do what they want to do. It has nothing to do with absence, all time should be quality time, I think. And so I think sometimes people believe, "Well, now is our time to be together, we must go to the zoo or we must go see a movie or we must do this." and for me, it's, I'm just, "What do you feel like doing? Just hanging out?" you know, just go to the Jewel together or do something big. I mean it doesn't have to be anything. It's being genuine. That's what it means to me.

– Mom, 2 kids, 16-25 (100302)

From another mom's response we glean that an important aspect is the dependability—consistency—that children know you are not just physically available to them, but mentally and emotionally as well.

Aside from the relational aspects of quality time, there is also the sense that quality time stands apart because of the way we experience it. While all other parts of our day may feel rushed and congested, quality time stands apart because it provides a temporal sanctity. One father notes that quality time is “when you can really sit back and enjoy (it). Yeah, quality time is time without the pressure.” Another dad makes the same distinction: “And I think that's, to me, that's probably the biggest component of quality time, is just the time spent in a non-stressed environment with somebody. (2 kids; 46-50 hrs.;101801)

But we can not always assume that *anytime* spent at home after a long work day constitutes quality time. Certainly, one father does not seem to think this is so. He says:

“Quality time only comes on the weekend....to have quality time, you have to have time to unwind. And by the time you get home, to the time that you go to bed... I mean, I'm not gonna say there's not quality time there, but it's not much.

It's a small amount of between the time you get home and the time you hit the sack."

-- Father, msd³ (101301)

When asked about all those hours in between, the father responds with

you're talking about the functions of a household. You know, eating, cleaning up, and getting ready for the next day. Then, you have to take about two hours to unwind. Then, you add in those functions that you have to get done. There really isn't much left, when it comes down to it.

In this case, the father is likely interacting with other family members as he goes about doing the daily tasks of family living. But clearly, to him, this does not constitute quality time presumably because it's not exactly a time of rest. Even the two hours that he professes to have loses the 'flavor' of quality time since it appears to be sandwiched in between other activities. This is evident when he contrasts his weeknights with the start of his weekend: I love Friday afternoons. I come home, I can lie on the floor on the carpet and just go ... 'Ahhhh.' I love that. So there's not a lot of quality time during the week...." He does go on to explain that the essential part of quality time is that sense of peace and relaxation. He describes a recent experience with his wife:

Quality time? Quality time for me is just being at peace with the ones that you love. Just, being at peace. My wife might be laying on this couch, reading a book. She likes to read. And, I'm laying on her lap. That's quality time for me. And, that's quality time for her. For me, that's quality time. I fell asleep in her lap last night for a half an hour. Then, she had to jump up and put some clothes in the washing machine. I said, "Where are you going?" I was resting. To me, that's quality time. It's just being at peace."

-- Father, msd (101301)

³ Msd= missing survey data

Thus, while this father doesn't mean to say that spending time with his family *isn't* an essential component of quality time, he does draw attention to another component: the feeling of not being rushed or stressed.

Of Fathers and Mothers

One might wonder if there are substantial differences in the way mothers and fathers define quality time. One of the most notable differences is in the way mothers' and fathers' begin their discourse on quality time. Whereas fathers begin by mentioning family vacations, and specific family events, mothers are likely to begin by talking about daily routine activities. For instance, one mom states: "I would say probably, on a day to day basis, the most quality time we spend together is at dinner. Um...we'll um...otherwise if we're going someplace in the car, that's a time that, you know, conversations happen." (Mom, 2 kids, 16-25 hrs; 100102)

This may be due in part to the way parents experience quality time with children. Moms tend to be the ones who were around for the day-to-day interaction with adolescents (even when mothers work, they work fewer hours than fathers), while fathers seem more likely to be present for the planned and structured events. So that even though many fathers in this study mentioned the interpersonal aspects of quality time, the examples they gave were much more likely to be centered on special occasions.

It is also consistently the case that fathers were more likely to be reported as needing to increase time with family. Although both parents admit that they would like to spend more time with family, it was often mothers who complained that fathers weren't around enough, and that work was not always the reason. One mother explains her husband's lack of involvement:

there were times where I felt that...you know, that he was...you know, not...not spending as much time. He's not really into doing family outings...you

know...that much. And, it used to bug me a lot and, and...and now I just sort of...you know, I've grown to accept that and I realize it's more fun to go on a family outing without him...than to go if he's not going to be enjoying it, you know...if he's gonna be sort of crabby about having to go. he's wanted to do like go a concert or...you know, like...once every five years we're go to a movie with all of us...you know, it's sort of a joke. You know, "Okay...we'll meet you again...in 2004.

-- Mom, 2 kids, 1-15 hrs (201402)

The Adolescent Perspective

Perhaps not surprisingly, many adolescents adopt a definition that is similar to that of their parents. In some cases, they even go so far as to voice the adamant rejection of the term like their parents do. When asked what quality time means to her, a young female responds:

Nothing. I think it's just a bunch of crap. Cause they portray families on T.V. and everything else as like being perfect. And, it's not always like that. They need to get realistic. Quality time, when it comes to my family, is like just sitting down and being together.

-- Female, 17 yrs. Old (102603)

But such strong reaction to the term is actually rather rare among the adolescents, which may suggest that parents are much more invested in these definitions than children are; they are the ones who are primarily held responsible for the allocation of time in the home.

The majority of the adolescents, are however, very similar in providing a definition that seems to openly accept all forms of family interaction as quality time. The following is a description that is almost indistinguishable from that provided by parents: "If I were to say 'quality time', I think it would be just simply time well spent. I mean, you can have a lot of quality time, it's not necessarily the quality versus quantity. It can be quality with quantity, you know?" (Female, 17 yrs old; 100303) Another teenager comments: "I mean, quality time is just as simple as renting a movie...like just sitting on the couch and watching it together, or going out to the movies together." (Female, 17 yrs old; 100403)

Some adolescents are quite articulate in expressing the interpersonal aspects of quality time. They note that is a time for sharing, for catching up:

I guess it's probably just actually hearing what other people have to say and like hearing what, it's amazing how you can like be completely unaware of what's going on with everyone else's lives. And so I guess, yeah quality time is when you actually catch up and see and get to like brag about all the cool things you've done since you last talked to them.

-- Female, 16 yrs old (104803)

Interestingly, though, the adolescent never specifically mentions family members in this passage, and consequently we are left unsure as to whether quality time is being defined as occurring specifically with family or with old friends⁴.

It also seems that many of these adolescents recognize certain activities and interactions as quality time, but often rely on distant memories in order to give concrete examples. For instance, when asked if she spends quality time with her mom, one girl responds:

Hmmm. Not exactly. I remember when I was a little...I have a lot of memories as a little girl. When my mother would read me like my stories at night, she'd always read me a couple of books at night. And she wouldn't leave the room. Like if I didn't want her to leave, she wouldn't leave until she thought I as asleep, like 20 minutes later. I don't know. Sort of the down time that we would spend together relaxing, maybe we'd rent a movie one night and have pizza, you know, that sort of thing.

-- Female, 17 yrs old (100303)

It is clear that although the young girl did spend quality time with her mom by occasionally sharing pizza and movie, her memories of a bedtime ritual when she was little have left a marked impression of what 'quality time' entails. She takes the time to mention that her mom would not

⁴ In fact, the coder for this interview coded both family and friends since they were unsure to whom the adolescent was referring.

leave the room until she feel asleep, perhaps echoing the sentiments of a mom in this sample who made the claim that quality time is about making kids feel secure.

Perhaps not surprisingly though, parents may actually be on to something when they express that quality time need not be an arranged and planned activity, especially as their children grow into adolescents. It seems that many adolescents express resistance to too many structured family interactions. As one adolescent defined it: “quality time is either dinner time or family vacations. That’s enough quality time for me....The best quality time for me is when I’m the only one in the house.” (Male, 18 yrs old; 100103) And while it doesn’t escape adolescents that dinner time is a kind of quality time, some express just being resigned to ‘get it over with.’ One teenager acknowledges this about dinner time:

Which is, I think, yeah I think it's quality time basically, even as much as we are forced to sit down together. Once your there you might as well talk and we use to have like a rule that you had to share a story about your day before you could get up and leave the table, so

-- Female, 16 yrs old (104803)

Another expresses how it may have been something that he *had* to do when he was younger, but given a choice in the matter, he’d “pass”:

When I was a little kid, I didn't really have a choice in the matter. You know, if I didn't want to go to dinner, I had to go anyway. But now its, "No thanks. I'll go buy my own."

- Male, 17 yrs old (103203)

In a sense, it is almost as if you have to avoid a frontal attack when it comes to quality time with adolescents, especially in their later years.

I suppose that it was because of this that many parents reported that one of the places they experienced quality time was in the family car. Many parents expressed how shuttling their

children to various activities, or playing chauffer to their older adolescents were instrumental in opening lines of communication. One father explains:

And when she needs to talk she talks to her mom and she sometimes talks to me. I mean, when I'm running her to – well, before she got her license, about six months ago, you know, we were running her to all the-to dance class, to, you know, to piano, to church, to all these things. And so, it's a great time. I mean that's, that is one nice thing in the twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen age- you're still stuck in the car driving them somewhere. So, you can talk to them.

-- Dad, msd (101401)

Another mom tells a similar story regarding driving her daughter to athletics practices and that being an opportunity to communicate:

I used to drive her to all her practices because that was in the car, on the way there or back. Usually on the way back, she would talk to me, and tell me things. You know, when you're at home or you're involved in your everyday thing, she wouldn't talk a lot. So, we would often use the car drive as a time to talk. .. I try to get her just to talk to me. She kind of gets in her shell and doesn't like to talk about things a lot of times. That's what was so nice with the trips. We'd be in the car together and you could get it drawn out a little bit.

-- Mom, 2 kids, 26-37 hrs (102502)

Unfortunately, children do grow-up, get their license, and eventually their own set of wheels.

One mom laments the fact that the time of driving her kids to school has passed:

I mean, honestly, when the kids went to school with me, I always though the time in the car was quality time. *Because, I had this kind of captive audience.* So, I always knew more about them I think, than if they had walked to school or you know, been on a bus.

-- Mom, 2 kids, 51-60 hrs (126202)

Another dad makes a similar observation about carpooling with his children; although interestingly, he does voice concern that this may be one of the few forms of quality time which the family enjoys:

Unfortunately, quality time is sometimes in the car going to or from, catching up on what's happened. And, they're pretty much you know, "We're in the car now. We've got five, ten or twenty minutes before we get to that point. So, what have you been doing? Is everything okay in school? Who are things going well with? Who are things going poorly with?"

-- Dad, msd (104101)

But I supposed what surprised me most, is that many adolescents also considered this quality time. They often, spontaneously, offered up car rides as an example of a form of quality time shared with one of their parents. When asked why television did not qualify as quality time, an adolescent explains:

Cause you're not paying attention to each other, you're watching the movie. Like, when I'm in the car with my Dad, I'll be able to talk to him about things that I would never be able to talk to my Mom about. Especially like, getting in fights. My Dad knows all the fights that I've ever gotten into. And my Mom, I would never tell. Cause she would just go through the roof.

-- male, 17 yrs old (101703)

In terms of quality time that I spend with my parents, I would say that it would definitely be in the car with my mom during the car pools, again. Because that's like our time. You know, we're isolated by ourselves.

-- Female, 17 yrs old (100303)

Lamentations

There is a sense that quality time changes throughout the life course of a family. Parents and adolescents alike mentioned that as the kids in the family got older, they seem to be doing less together. As children grow up, not only do they seem to become more interested in hanging out with friends rather than their family, but they genuinely begin to develop their own tastes for recreational activities. One mom pauses to reflect how, were it not for their participation in the study, she would not have seen her son that evening:

I was just thinking about that either yesterday or today, that we don't have conversations like we used to. When I used to drive him, it was great. I mean, we talked about everything and anything under the sun. it was wonderful. And, I miss that. I really miss that because now, well, you're here and we're doing the interview, but if I was home doing something, he would have still been out. And, he probably would have left right after he got home. He would have gotten home a little later because he probably would have stopped somewhere to eat. And then

gotten home, and taken care of a few things, made a few phone calls, then he would have been out the door. So, we don't talk as much as we used to.

- Mom, 1 kid, 1-15 hrs (101702)

What I was most struck by was how many parents mentioned that they had very little quality time with each other. After describing a recent gymnastics meet with his daughter as an example of quality time, a father is struck with a realization about quality time with his wife:

You know that's interesting...I would say that that quality time has suffered recently. That, that has been the quality time that has probably suffered most. It's either we're working or we're home with the, uh, with the girls... And, you know, occasionally we'll, we'll go off and do things. But usually when we do it together it's, it's a social event, like a neighborhood or social event or a work related social event. And we don't have as much as what the girls would call, we don't go on dates.... It's very rare that that happens. And uh, um, usually the time that we spend together, um, just talking, just the two of us...it's usually like late at night, right before uh, we go to bed or early in the morning, because that's just where it fits in...that's kind of tough because the quality time suffers in terms of those conversations so... Yeah, that's uh, that's probably the area that's suffered the most, is the quality time between the, the two of us. We need a vacation. (Laughter).

-- Father, 3 kids, 46-50 hrs (100401)

Many parents expressed that even when their children were little they neglected to set time aside for each other, and wondered whether that hurt their relationship. When asked if she and her husband set time aside for each other today, one wife explains:

I think that now that the boys are big, and gone a lot, that's not a problem. But, I think it was a problem when they were young, that we didn't have time that we made for ourselves. And I think it hurt us a lot, when we were younger, that we didn't do that. That's something we'd do differently, if we ever had children again.

-- Mom, 2 kids, 46-50 hrs (101802)

Of course, not all parents lament their lack of couple-time, and examining the responses from these parents may give us an indication of the logic that was used when most parents were

willing to trade quality time with spouses for quality time with family. One mom comments on her observation of couples who do go out a lot on their own:

I guess there should be some fun in your life. That's true. But, I think you're missing out when you're gone from your home four or five nights a week doing adult activities. Well, if you're going to your Lion's meeting on Monday, you're bowling on Tuesday, you're playing Bingo on Wednesday and you're going bowling on, you know? Sometimes they'll say, well, we couple bowl one night and then we single bowl on another night. I just think that when you have kids that some of that stuff needs to be put on hold until the kids are older. There will be plenty of time when you can bowl every night of the week, when they're gone.We don't do anything outside the home right now, that doesn't have anything to do with the kids. Because there are so many things that they need from you at this age, that there's just not time for other activities for us right now. But, in just a few short years, there's gonna be all kinds of time. It'll be here faster than you will ever know

– Mom, 2 kids, 46-50 hrs (106202)

And indeed, another mom is beginning to sense that, as she reflects on one experience she will miss when her son goes off to college:

Sometimes he brings his friends over and we'll all sit there. That's kind of neat. I'll miss that when he leaves. I really will. I was thinking about it, I will miss having all his friends over, because they're kind of neat.

- Mom, 1 kid, 1-15 hrs (101702)

An expression of values

Throughout all of the interviews, however, I was quite struck by how much of parents expressions of quality time reflected their values. Many saw the issue as a fundamental indicator of just how strongly committed one is to the family, and worried that a lack of family time had far reaching implications for our children, community and society. One mom expresses her views fully:

If you're gonna make the commitment to have a family, I think you then have to make the commitment to make time to be a family and not just say, well, I'm working fifty hours, and he's working fifty hours. We deserve to leave the kids

with a sitter and going to Acapulco for a week. I think you have to stop and think, yeah, but what do those kids deserve? They've put in a stressful week with the way school and their life is busy working too. And, they need to know you are there for them. And I think how busy your schedule is, if your family is important, you can make the time for them. I think that's the big thing that I think we're missing. And that is what worries me in the generation that's not getting that kind of nurturing, is that they're going to grow up thinking this is the norm and therefore not give that nurturing. And, I think that why we have young people in society that then can't have empathy for anyone else because they don't know what those kinds of feelings are all about, because it wasn't nurtured in the home. And I think throwing more money at the problem, which is what I think a lot of people in this community do. They think, well, if I buy my kid the BMW when he's sixteen or if we go to Disneyland every year, and we do this, that that makes it okay for the time we're not spending together. I think that where people are missing the boat. I think more and more people say, well, I'm not involved with my kids because they don't really want me here anyway. Your kid may look at you and say, oh, it doesn't matter if you come to my game. Oh no, you don't have to be there. But inside, they really want you there because you can see it. I've watched kids on the play field, just like, looking around for their parents. You can see how they're whole demeanor changes once that parent shows up. And yeah, maybe they don't want you hugging them and flaunting over them in front of the other kids, but they want to know you care. I think that's where people are kind of missing the boat.

- Mom, 1 kid, 16-25 hrs (102002)

Of course, it is questionable whether the values expressed by this mom arise out of her circumstances (having one child, and working only part-time, one might say 'she can afford to feel that way') or whether she has arranged her life in a way to fulfill her ideals for family life. But in this study, many parents, even those working longer hours, expressed rather similar views. They worried that other parents were attempting to fill the void of time with material objects, and wondered what type of society were creating. My question is: what type of society are we already?

Discussion and Conclusions

I started out with a paradox: parents report a desire to spend more time with family, yet many studies suggest that the amount of time parents are spending with children has not changed over the past few decades. There are a number of possibilities as to why we are observing these seemingly contradictory findings. First, it may be that like many perceived changes in history we've utilized a reference point that is built upon nostalgia. Somehow, we may have created a past in which our parents managed to spend more time with us than we are managing to spend with our children.

A second, and related reason, is because I believe that there may be a life cycle effect in the experience of time—which may also explain why adolescents are not as preoccupied with this issue as much as parents are. As adults, we increasingly experience time as a passing thing...as more of it looms behind us; the little of it that remains becomes ever more precious. As adolescents, the reverse is true...for them, time looms ahead almost indefinitely; what can't be accomplished today can be done tomorrow. Our perceptions when we were children (with the exception of those of genuinely absent parents) was likely that we spent a lot of time with our family, and perhaps even *too much* if we found that family events conflicted with our desires to do other things or be in the company of peers. As parents of adolescents, it is likely that we are now the ones seeking to gather the family together, and the many obstacles to doing so leaves us feeling like we are running an uphill race. The fact that our adolescents almost have one foot out the door (literally on their way to college) certainly makes many parents feel as if time is running out.

Another reason why we may have this paradox is if our *need* for quality time (or family time) has increased. If the pace of life has increased dramatically, if our work-related activities overburden us like never before, then it is possible that families (and parents in particular) are

needing more time for *recreation* in general – quite literally the re-creation of our physical and psychological capacity to work. For parents with children, family time (and by extension quality time) becomes the acceptable form of recreation—since too much time devoted to adult only activities is seen as irresponsible parenting (see quoted interviews).

I had anticipated that the gap between expressed desire for more family time and actual reports of family time would stem from a gap between the ideal and the reality. I thought parents and children would express lamenting the lack of time for long vacations, weekly trips to the theater, and cite scheduling conflicts as making even daily routines of dinner an impossibility. Instead, I was very surprised to learn how many families outright rejected the “Disneyland” experience of quality time. On the contrary, for many of these families, quality time could be a car ride, sitting down to dinner, renting a movie, joking around ... anything that connected family members to each other. I had thought that with a shortage of time (like all matters of production) the emphasis indeed would be on quality not quantity. The results were almost entirely the opposite. Why?

The majority of these parents claimed that those who utilized the term as an expression of planned and organized activities were just doing so in order to ease their guilt over lack of quantity time. But a similar argument might be presented by those parents who do set aside time for special activities and planned events. One might argue that to utilize a broader definition allows parents to ease their guilt of not setting aside special time and activities for family. In essence that they are expanding the scope of the definition to allow it to fit what they are able to provide, and thus can afford to focus on *quantity* of quality time, since so much of daily life fits within that definition.

Whether parents are indeed engaging in this cognitive exercise to relieve dissonance is difficult to tell without more in-depth interviewing. But I do think that there are also reasons to believe that this expanding definition of quality time may be reactionary to cultural changes, as well as time pressures in society. When the rest of the world bears down its universal clock on your life, in a sense ANY time that you get to spend at home with the family, by simply being non-work time, becomes quality time. It is quality time because it is a time when (ideally) you don't have to keep a strict eye on the watch. If the pace of work is stressed and haggard, quality time is (ideally) relaxed and enjoyable. If the world of work is obligation, then quality time should have a sense of 'wanting to be there.' If the world exists on a half-hour schedule, quality time should have no boundaries. And nowhere might this broad definition of quality time be embraced than among adolescents who have *so* much of their lives temporally structured.

Those that do plan and structure their quality time may do so in an effort to sanctify it—to say “this is reserved; you cannot trod upon it.” But many seem to salvage it by re-creating it each day, even in the face of worldly constraints. In the end it appears that in a sense, quality time *is of quality because* it stands apart from all other types of time in that it's meant to connect us with family members, to psychologically and emotionally invigorate us. It is our breath of fresh air that is breathed in, as one mom put it, “our silent exchanges.”

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Appendix

Interview Codes

(Items of special interest for this paper appear in **bold** typeface)

Absence of Work	Health
Admire parents	Knows Parents' Job
Afraid	Leisure Time
Angry	Money
Being Tired	Notes Work Hours
Bringing Work Home	Orgs-Extracurricular
Career	Parent talks about work
Child Ed Asp	Parent-Child Time
Child Ed Invest	Parental Education
Child Family Asp	Parenting Styles
Child Occ Asp	Part-Time Work
Child Relationship	Proud
Children's Homework	Purchasing Services
Claims Independent	Quality Time
Conflict Over Time	Sad
Coping Strategies	Scornful-Contemptuous
Couple Time	Self-Employed
Current School Issues	Spouse Relationship
Decisions About Children	Stress
Disgusted	Surprised
DOL	Time Alone
Domestic	Time at Work
Excited	Unpaid Child Care
Extended Family	Values-Religion
Family Business	Work Benefits
Family Time	Work Communicate Child
Fighting	Work Communicate Spouse
Friendships	Work Family Interface
GRA	Work from Home
Guilty-Ashamed	Work Sat-Dis
Happy	Work Time Changes