

Family Strategies for Managing the Time Crunch

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Abstract

Most American children no longer come home directly after school to play in the yard with friends under the observant eye of a stay-at-home mother. As have their parents, children have begun to experience a decline in free time and an increase in the structure of the free time they do have. This paper addresses the strategies families have developed to manage their own activities and those of their children. Based upon qualitative interviews with 20 families with children between the ages of 8 and 12, we describe the goals parents have for their children, the types of management strategies families utilize, and their successes and difficulties in managing their busy lives.

Introduction

Between 1981 and 1997 two major changes took place in the lives of American children. First, the amount of free time children have, defined as time not spent in personal care, eating, sleeping, and school declined from about 34 percent of a child's week to 30 percent (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2000). Second, children's time is increasingly scheduled and organized, with structured activities taking up much of the after-school hours. In 1997, elementary school-age children's time spent in structured activities such as sports, church, art, and social activities averaged about 22 percent of their free time, compared with 20 percent in 1981 (Hofferth & Sandberg, forthcoming). While one-quarter of that free time continues to be spent watching television, increasingly, children are engaged in a variety of structured activities such as sports and youth groups. Between 1981 and 1997 children's participation in sports increased 27 percent. Recent research has focused upon activities during the after-school hours (Hofferth & Jankuniene, 2000). However, little research has focused upon how families organize and manage their complex work and family activities. This paper focuses primarily on family goals and strategies for management of the after-school activities of children. It also focuses upon parental reflections upon their goals and objectives in involving children in after-school activities.

Why has Children's Activity Involvement Increased?

Involvement by children in structured activities is due primarily to both economic and to cultural factors. Children's lives are not separate from those of their parents. Women's increased schooling and expanded role in the economy and society have

increased pressures on families from outside. The family is no longer an island of peace and calm, a haven from the heartless world. Social forces from the outside world permeate all family interactions and transactions. In addition, it is likely that preferences have changed. Ways of life common to more rural settings have given way to the hustle and bustle of urban life. As families have spread out across the United States, activities focused upon the family have declined and new forms of interaction and community activities based upon interest and propinquity have developed. Families are responsible for preparing children for life beyond the workday, and most parents are acutely aware of the many demands on them and skills children will need.

Economic Factors

One of the major factors influencing children's activities is the increased involvement by parents in a large variety of activities, including employment, which at the minimum increases children's out-of-home time in school and child care. In contrast to 1981, when only about half of mothers of young children were employed outside the home, today over 2/3 of mothers of young children and more than 3/4 of mothers of school-age children work outside the home (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999).

From the vantage point of children, parental employment patterns have changed dramatically in the past three decades. In 1963 only 1/3 of children lived in families with more than one earner. By 1997, 56 percent of children had more than one earner, most often with both earners working full-time (Waite & Nielsen, 1999). While this has had a major impact on family income, it has also created new problems and pressures, such as

stress, conflict over household chores and responsibilities, and pressure on employers for flexibility and family-friendly policies.

A major contributor to the rise in labor force participation is women's increased level of education. Today, in fact, many colleges enroll more young women than young men. Highly educated women want the same out of life that men have always enjoyed -- a full, active part in the life of the family and community. As a result of increased involvement in higher education and work, family formation has been delayed. Today young women wait until about age 24 and young men about age 26 to marry, and many cohabit before marriage (Goldscheider & Waite, 1991). Besides school and work, both men and women participate actively in a variety of activities outside the home; involvement in nonfamily activities may also continue after marriage. Young parents today do not just give up all their prior activities, but may be involved in studying, in personal hobbies, exercise, and self-help groups.

Cultural and Developmental Factors

Parents are very concerned that children develop their potential skills and talents to their fullest. Many feel that it is no longer sufficient to just master academic subjects. Today parents want their children to learn social, and emotional skills as well as cognitive skills to enable them to master and adapt to new environments. In addition, parents may have very well-formed objectives about what they want for their children and, therefore, encourage the kinds and numbers of activities children pursue to be consistent with these goals. They may constrain children's activities to be within certain settings such as a church or cultural center. Additionally, parents are constrained by the

settings in which they live, their work environments, their children's school schedules, and neighborhood supports, including their community norms and values. Some settings may provide more opportunities than others.

As families become burdened with their own responsibilities to employers outside the family, how families manage their children is an especially important concern. There are a number of strategies that families can take to balance the needs of children for autonomy and growth and the needs of the family to meet their goals of stability, order, and cultural integrity.

Types of Management Strategies

Young children's early environments are made up in large part by family. As they enter school, however, children's environments are increasingly dominated by peers (Adler & Adler, 1998; Harris, 1998). Parents continue to have a major influence on their children's lives through geographic location and choice of schools. Even if parents are constrained by income or other factors, they can still engage in a process of managing family and children's activities in such a way as to maximize the positive experiences and minimize the negative (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder & Sameroff, 1999). They make contacts with other families, serve as advocates for their children in negotiating the school bureaucracy, and attempt to garner resources for their family members relative to others. To do so they depend heavily on their ability to develop and take advantage of social relationships which help spread some of the burdens of locating resources and obtaining information as well as providing assistance when needed (Coleman, 1988).

According to Furstenberg and colleagues (1999), three family-management strategies are particularly important to adolescent success. The first is parental involvement in community organizations. A second strategy is investment of the parent, such as spending time with the child, getting her involved in programs, and communicating with the child. A third strategy is restrictiveness, which monitors the child's activities and limits his/her movement. Other strategies were identified, but they were not linked to successful adolescent behavior. In this paper we document the goals parents have for their children and the types of management strategies they have developed. Our approach, which was open-ended, has the objective of identifying the goals and the range of strategies parents use to achieve them and manage their obligations.

Data and Methods

Data presented here are based on qualitative interviews conducted with 20 families in a mid-sized community in Michigan from November 1999 to May 2000. "Riverview" (fictional name) is a small city of approximately 40,000 residents, according to the 1990 census. It boasts several large corporations, a small private university, and a large hospital which provide a mix of white-collar and blue-collar jobs. According to the 1990 census, the population of this community is over 95 percent white, with small portions of the population (<2% for each group) being African American, Latino, Asian and Pacific Islander, and with less than 1% of the population being Native American. Due to the presence of well-paying jobs within the community, the median family income in Riverview is between \$45,000 and \$50,000 in 1990 (compared with a median family

income of all U.S. families of \$35,353). Less than 7 percent of families in Riverview fell below the poverty line in 1990, compared with 10.7 percent of all U.S. families.

Although Riverview does not lie within a large metropolitan area, it is within easy driving distance of other medium-sized communities in the region, and some Riverview residents commute to jobs and participate in university classes in nearby communities.

Interviews of Riverview families were conducted with one parent (usually, but not exclusively, the mother) and one pre-adolescent child. For this study we targeted families with children between the ages of 8 and 12 so that we could compare our qualitative findings to national survey data on children's time use (Hofferth & Sandberg, forthcoming). We gained access to families through a local public elementary and middle school. Permission to use these schools as sites to recruit parents and children was granted by the superintendent of the Riverview public school district.

With the assistance of the elementary school and middle school principals we mailed recruitment letters and brief surveys to 125 families (25 each in grades 3-7) to ensure that we would have a diverse sample of respondents to contact and interview. Having alerted the principals to our interest in meeting with families from a range of educational and occupational backgrounds, the principals used the following procedures for selecting which families received the letters at the respective schools. At the elementary school the principal selected a total of 75 families (25 each in grades 3, 4, and 5) by randomly choosing one of the four classrooms per grade for distribution of the invitations. The middle school principal did essentially the same thing by selecting a sixth grade "team" and a seventh grade "team" out of the three teams per grade and then he randomly selected about half of the students in each of those teams. It is important to

note that in this small city word travels relatively quickly that there is a research project being conducted, causing some people to wonder why they are not included in the study. For this reason the principals announced to their teachers and parents via newsletters and school meetings that not everyone would be invited to participate, and that it was a “random” selection process.

Overall, within two weeks of the mailing, we received responses from 42 parents interested in participating in the project. Parents’ responses to the brief survey allowed us to determine the demographic profile of each family. For the initial interviews we have been contacting roughly equal numbers of single- and dual-earner families. We have also interviewed several “one-and-a-half” earner families (i.e., families in which one spouse works full-time and the other spouse, usually the mother, works part-time). At present we have conducted 20 interviews with parent-child pairs. Of these 20 families all but one had two parents residing in the household. In sum, these families include single-earner, one-and-a-half-earner, and dual-earner families, families where the wage earners are involved in a diverse set of occupations and have completed varying levels of education, and families whose household income ranged from \$29,000 to over \$150,000 per year, with most families interviewed having household incomes greater than \$75,000. Specifically, we interviewed fifteen mothers and five fathers and eleven girls, and nine boys ages 9 to 12 in grades 3 through 7.

Interviews with parents were conducted in locations most convenient to the parent (e.g., their place of work, their home, a local restaurant, or their child’s school). Interviews with the elementary school children took place during the student’s lunch hour when they were normally at recess, while middle school students were interviewed

immediately after school. Interviews with children at both schools took place in a quiet space in the libraries of their respective schools. Parent interviews lasted between one and two hours; interviews with children took between 20 and 40 minutes to complete. The interview questions cover a wide range of topics designed to elicit information about the parent's and child's daily activities and weekly schedules, as well as parents' aspirations and goals for their children (contact the authors for a full listing of parent and child interview questions). The names of the parents and children have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

Results

In general, the typical level of activity for children was two after-school activities. Usually children were involved in one athletic activity and one musical (e.g., piano, violin) or community activity (Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, 4-H) at any one given time (e.g., fall, spring). With regard to adults, most parents were involved with at least one of their children's activities in some capacity ranging from frequent participation to less intense involvement. For example, some parents (especially fathers) coached one of their daughter's or son's athletic teams or served as advisors or volunteer assistants to community activity organizations. Other parents served on community committees that organize teams and supervise leagues. All parents provided transportation for their children and sometimes their children's friends to and from the activities. The following sections provide specificity with regard to these typical trends.

Parental Goals

Parents had a variety of goals for their children, articulated during the interviews. While most had high educational expectations, such as completing a college degree, their expectations were broader. All wanted their children to be healthy and happy, regardless of what occupation they chose. Parents expressed this preference as follows (parent/child cover names listed at end of interview excerpt or vice versa in quotes from children):

I don't care how much money. I don't care if they're gay or straight. . . I kind of have a preference, but I don't care if they're artists or academics as long as they're happy and safe and healthy. (Kate/Darryl)

“So long as you're happy with what you're doing, then that's all I want for her.” (Diane/Leslie)

I guess that I would like him to be at peace with himself. It's an inner contentment, that what you're doing is good, and it has meaning, and that it's valuable. To me, that's the secret that you're here for a purpose. Finding it and doing it is what it's all about. (Molly/Dan)

One parent joked that she wanted the child to “be drop-dead gorgeous, rich, and take care of her mother in old age.” Other types of goals and expectations included excellence, to be themselves, to do what you can to your ability, to make good decisions, to share, to cooperate, to go the extra mile, to be physically active, polite, helpful, responsible, self-motivated, religious-based, have high self-esteem, have respect for others, to take pride in your work, and to follow the Ten Commandments. Most parents expected their children to marry and raise a family.

The vast majority of parents described a connection between these goals and their children's participation in extracurricular activities. One parent was articulate in expressing the connection:

There're opportunities outside of school that you can't get in school, and that's what I mean by enrichment. . . what I like about after-school activities [is that these are] . . . things they truly enjoy, so sometimes school is, yeah they enjoy it, but it's not a passion. And I always admire people who have passions, great

passions in their children, to nurture them ... [it] has been fun to watch.
(Judy/Serena).

In addition, most parents greatly valued physical activity (exercise, sport). As one parent put it:

One of the things that we really encourage in our household is that you take care of your body as well as your mind. (Judy/Serena)

When asked “What is important about [involvement in] music?” one parent replied:

. . . something to do that [is] using another part of your brain, you know, and maybe finding a talent, and if you have it, why not use it. I’m all for exposure to a lot of different things, and then let the kids hone in on what they want to do.
(Angela/Mark)

Finally, another parent thought social skills were critical for children to learn:

It seems like what seems to have gotten me by most, more than anything else, is being able to deal with people. It doesn’t matter what job you have, what occupation, whether you’re in school, whether you’re at home. You have to be able to deal with people or you’re going to get frustrated or they’re going to get frustrated at you. (Diane/Leslie)

These are a sampling of the types of goals parents had. They also recognized that the world is a lot different today than it was when they were growing up:

Kids have many more opportunities for outside activities today. . . kids tended to come home from school, play with kids in their neighborhood, and that was pretty much the way it was. . . There are also a lot more dangers today. (Billie/Tara)

In response to the question: “What do parents expect from children today compared with what your parents expected when you grew up?” the following comments from parents were typical:

We don’t just let our kids go . . . I think they need guidance and direction because they’re so influenced by their peers, and if the peer group has a bad influence, then it can be a problem. (Billie/Tara).

If there are pressures, it’s a different kind of peer pressure . . . the drinking the drugs, and the sex, and all that stuff.” But I think your basic expectations haven’t changed. (Angela/Mark).

Several mothers mentioned that, in the past, women did not have the numerous opportunities for participation in sports that their daughters have today. Several mentioned that they were discouraged from participation in sports; others mentioned that they had grown up with gender role stereotypes regarding the things they could do with their lives, both sources of great regret.

MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Employment and Work Hours

Two strategies to manage work and family life include the single earner model, where one of two parents is available full-time for child care and children's out-of-home extra-school activities, and the "1 1/2" earner model, wherein by working part-time one parent is available for most of the children's after-school time. A third strategy consists of maintaining flexible work schedules, where one or both parents modify their work schedules in order to provide maximum time at home with children (especially after school). This option is primarily used by families in which both parents work (either part-time or full-time).

The single most widely used strategy was to modify the mother's employment schedule. For some families this meant that the mother did not work and for others the mother works part-time. Out of our sample of 20 families, we have 8 two-parent families in which both parents are employed full-time; 7 single-earner, two-parent families (1 where the mother is in school) in which the father works full-time; 4 two-parent families in which the father works full-time and the mother works part-time; and 1 single parent family in which the mother works. However, it is important to point out that even when

mothers are not employed, this does not mean they are at home full-time. The majority of these mothers volunteered at their children's schools and were involved in a variety of activities (e.g., Girl Scouts) outside the home. One mother worked part-time Spring through Fall for the family business. Though she says she "stays home," she was probably working as much as many of the employed mothers during the busy seasons. Some of those at home would prefer to have a part-time job and most had worked before their youngest child was born. In most of the cases in which the mother worked, she worked part-time so that her hours corresponded to those of her children, basically, the school day. Most could be home when their children came home or they picked up their children at school.

Finally, most of the working mothers said that they had flexibility at work and that made it possible to maintain their family schedules. Though in dual-earner families both parents can maximize their flexibility by each working non-standard schedules, we did not see this strategy in Riverview. Most husbands kept their traditional employment schedules. A few fathers said that they kept their schedule to 40 hours a week and tried to be at home as much as possible, including cutting back on some vacation activities with male friends (such as hunting) to be with the family. Husbands' long working hours puts a lot of stress on the family, because as one mother explained:

the more hours he's gone, the more hours I'm doing home duty by myself with the kids. (Jessica/John).

Thus modifications on who works, as well as how much and when each spouse works, are key to family management. The issue did not appear to be restricted to two-earner families only; families were incredibly busy, regardless of their employment schedules. Consequently, we discuss the other strategies families have developed

without regard to the employment status of the mother. For the most part, among these rather well-off families, the issue did not tend to be an economic one; rather, differences in family priorities and strategies tended to be characteristics of the individual family preferences and values. Most seemed fairly content with their work schedules.

Organization, Priorities and Technology

Many of the parents mentioned setting priorities as an important strategy. Most families put priority on doing well in school, then most set a priority on family time, then on extracurricular activities. Parents also prioritized among activities. Mothers served a key organizational role:

I would say that I would be the timekeeper and the scheduler of events The key to the whole thing is to be very, very organized. (Jana/Shawn).

Several parents mentioned the use of the telephone to keep everyone up with what was going on. In families where a mother is not home during the after-school hours the children immediately call their mothers or fathers at work upon arriving home. Children also have to ask permission to go over to their friends' homes. In one case there was a problem because the mother was not available when something came up; in this case the father picked up the child. While these families all had computers, they did not appear to be heavy cell-phone users.

Other strategies include giving reminders to children the evening before, preparing meals ahead of time, and managing a family calendar. Some families explicitly cut back. One family decided to simplify and scheduled "down time" for the kids:

...we had been scheduling several activities each night, and "it just overwhelmed the kids, it overwhelmed me. ... we made a conscious decision this year to pick the things we really wanted to do, and forget about everything else. (Billie/Tara)

Some parents mentioned limiting the kids to one sport at a time; others mentioned limiting time spent playing video games and playing with the computer, or using such time as a reward for practicing musical instruments or studying.

Help with Transportation and Babysitting

In many families mothers and fathers share the task of picking up children and driving them to activities. One mother was delayed at one child's activity and called her husband to pick up the other child, so they both arrived at home together. Another strategy was that children attended the activities of their siblings; they read a book while a brother or sister took a lesson.

Both in emergencies and as an on-going strategy parents elicit the help of relatives or neighbors for assistance with driving children to after-school activities. Parents often set up mutually beneficial arrangements with one or more families, reciprocating as needed with driving tasks. One important strategy is to car-pool with neighbors to take the children to and from school. Sometimes the children stayed with the neighbor after school until their parent picked them up after work. While this strategy was used by the single parent, it was also used by other families to manage differing family schedules.

Surprisingly, we found a substantial number of parents who drove their children to school, even though their children could take the school bus, walk, or ride their bikes to school. Sometimes this was for the parent's convenience; other times it was because the bus ride was long or because the child had a heavy musical instrument to carry.

Many times parents picked children up after school and immediately took them to after-school activities.

When parents are not available at home during the after-school hours, older teens or neighbors are employed to “babysit” younger children for one or two hours until a parent arrives at home. In some families older siblings fulfill this task while the parent(s) is/are at work. One parent mentioned that a teenage girl “babysat” with the kids for an hour after they got home from school 2 days per week and that on the other days the children went home with friends to their friends’ home (where the mother was home) and then were picked up there. Another parent mentioned that a neighboring mother offered to pick up her child (along with her own) and take them home with her for a few hours after school, for which she was paid. These arrangements were informally arranged. Others mentioned the use of after-school programs for children when the children were younger, and many mentioned an after-school study hour where their children worked on homework while they waited for a ride home or before going to an activity or practice.

Parental Participation in Children’ Activities

One very interesting strategy that several parents mentioned was involvement by the parents in their children’s activities. One or more parents in the family participated in one (or several) child(ren)’s activities through coaching, volunteer work, or helping with organizational tasks as noted above. Several mothers mentioned participation in scout troops as leader or volunteer, working as an officer in the PTO, volunteering in their children’s classes at school, and helping in children’s events such as fund-raisers,

festivals, and carnivals. Fathers coached various activities and were involved in the PTO. This involvement served at least two purposes: 1) to provide children and parent joint activities and schedules and 2) to provide some control over the peer group. In one family, the father is an assistant Scout master, and coaches soccer and basketball, while the mother volunteers at the school, including working with teachers, with the band, and going on field trips. The mother in this family explained:

I think my husband and I are involved with so many activities because we like to pull together these nice groups of kids . . .with a friendly supportive group of other kids who have the same . . . moral values, the same orientation toward life . . .if the peer group has a bad influence, then it can be a problem. (Billie/Tara)

Overall, parents expressed and exhibited a strong interest in participating in their children's activities. Along these lines it is important to note that in some families in which the parents could not attend a particular event they made sure that the grandparents attended the events and provided transportation for their grandchildren.

Children's Involvement in Household Chores and Family Routines

One of the important activities mentioned by almost all parents is that their children were assigned chores around the house. These chores ranged from care of pets, to vacuuming, to cleaning off the table and loading/unloading the dishwasher, to laundry. Most children were required to pick up their own possessions and to keep their rooms tidy and clean. In some families this was formalized in terms of a chore list and schedule with allowance tied to the completion of these chores while in other families there was no link with any reward or allowance. About half of the families provided allowances to their children, ranging from \$5 to \$10 per week, depending on the age of the child and whether basics such as lunches were to come out of the allowance money.

Almost all families had regular dinner times. Two were unable, for reasons having nothing to do with schedule, to get together as an entire family. One family made a point of sitting down for one formal meal a week —Sunday dinner. The average family managed a sit-down meal with everyone present on 3 days during the week. Other days, due to children's and parents' schedules, family members ate when they could. Most thought a family dinner was a good idea and did it when they could, but much of the time it was an unattainable ideal.

Parent-Child Communication and Negotiation

A number of parents were very explicit about their strategies of exposing children to a variety of activities in the hope that they could find something they liked and at which they could become skilled. Parents used a variety of strategies to make sure that the child liked these activities and closely monitored when it was time to drop them. These strategies included using a test period for starting new activities and negotiation for a trial period for dropping the activity. Most parents seemed very sensitive to the expressed preferences of their children for activity involvement, as they explained:

What I've tried to do is offer the kids a variety of things to try. And then if something is really what they want to do, then we go in that direction.
(Billie/Tara)

We try real hard to, not so much tell our children, but guide them, and give them lots of choices and let them make some decisions. . . Kids by nature aren't really naturally very organized, and you want them to be. And this way they get a chance to make their own organizational pattern and skills that work for them. . . that's probably one thing that's hard about the structured school activities, is it makes them a little bit more organized than they really need to be at an early age. . . but there's tradeoffs... (Judy/Serena)

Parents do provide pressure. In an answer to a question about why he chose to play baseball, one 12-year-old boy said:

My dad mostly encouraged me. I mean he, he used to play when he was a little kid, a lot. (Shawn/Jana)

A few children did express problems with their schedules. For example, one boy found himself overextended when the soccer and baseball seasons overlapped more than the family had anticipated. With running involved in both activities he remarked:

“my legs get, sometimes my legs will get sore.” (Shawn/Jana)

A 9-year old in an activity 3 hours a day 3 days a week was pretty tired by Friday:

Like usually on Fridays I’m like I don’t want to be here [but once I’m there] sometimes I just pep right up. (Serena/Judy)

How do parents and children negotiate the end of an activity? Children and parents often talked about how things were going, and children often asked to be allowed to quit. Sometimes parents negotiated to the end of the month or to the end of the season depending upon the cost of the activity and how far along the season was. Given that the children seemed very compliant and did not often express dissatisfaction with their schedules and activities, we asked parents how they knew when children were doing too much.

[gymnastics] is one sport where you never really have to worry about a parent making a child do it, because if a child really doesn’t want to they’ll just find ways not to do it. (Judy/Serena)

One parent said that she was very sensitive to stress indications (sleep disturbances, catching a cold, crying) (Billie/Tara). Many parents commented on what

they viewed as other parents placing excessive demands on or pushing their children to participate in particular activities. For example, one mother said:

I've seen girls who have to be there [at gymnastics practice], and they disrupt the class so the other ones can't get their routine down. And it's a hassle, and finally sometimes you just have to tell the parent they don't enjoy it, they're causing more problems here than they're worth on our team. Can you please remove [them], rethink this idea. It's not worth it, the kid's miserable, the parents are grouchy. (Alyson/Pam)

Social Comparison Strategy.

One way that parents use to justify and to help themselves feel satisfied with their own choices is by continually comparing themselves to “other” families. Parents compare their parenting and time-use strategies to those of “other” families which are always presented in negative terms. Parents seem to recognize that they could be doing “worse,” and use this knowledge to achieve a sense of balance between both the conflicting needs of various family members and the desires of parents and their children.

With regard to this last strategy a number of the parents were asked how they see other families in the community coping with the time crunch. Invariably the parents interviewed cogently state that they frequently see other parents in the community “totally stressed out,” rushing their children from school to activity to activity and travelling out of town every weekend for yet another soccer or ice hockey tournament. For example, the following are typical comments along these lines from parents:

I know some people ... the parents really push the kids to get involved in not just school activities, but two or three other extracurricular activities at a real young age. And the kids end up being very burned out, and then don't want to do anything. And [the parents say] ‘I've invested all this time and energy and money into dance lessons over the last four years and you will continue on. And then who is actually doing it? Is it the parents living through the child, or is it because the kids want to learn a skill? (Erin/Judy)

I think parents today in general are very lax with their kids. I think parents today tend to give their kids physical things, objects, in place of giving their kids time and attention. . . They have a lot of money, the kids are given \$50 and told to go out and do whatever. . . (Billie/Tara)

It appears that the parents in Riverview draw on these vivid accounts of their harried neighbors to gain a sense of calm and contentment from their belief that, while they are busy, they are not overdoing it like some of their peers. A number of our interviewees are quite busy. But regardless of how hectic their lives are, every family can identify another family that is busier. A possible interpretation of the importance of these social comparisons is that they provide the parents with some energy and satisfaction which allows them to press on through the difficult days and busy weeks with their children.

Summary and Conclusions

While we have been collecting information through in-depth interviews with regard to the management of time, what continues to strike us about the parents and children we are getting to know is how articulate they are about their goals and how well these busy families manage their weekly schedules and daily activities. We found that parents were very aware of the importance of enrichment opportunities in their children's lives. While some were more articulate than others, most had clear goals and felt as though they were in control over their schedules and were making the best decisions for their families and children's lives. If stress arose, they dealt with it promptly. As a result, we found little evidence that children were overscheduled and under stress.

Through a combination of spending time with their children and through participation in community activities, most families manage to make it. Thus, Furstenberg and his associates' findings are certainly supported in this qualitative study. However, we found some additional strategies not identified in the previous research. This includes adjusting parental schedules to spend time with the family; calling upon relatives, neighbors, and friends as well as paid assistants for support; the setting of priorities, and the use of technology and organization strategies; maintaining close communication with children; establishing and keeping family routines; and utilizing social comparison. In general, it appears that families use different combinations of the strategies listed above at different points in time depending on their children's ages and the kinds of activities they are involved in.

Finally, we found little support for the control/limit-setting strategy Furstenberg and associates proposed. Instead, most of our parents were very aware of the importance of granting autonomy to children and the danger of overcontrol. Of course, it should be noted that this community is a small, relatively homogeneous, and safe. Parents probably have less to worry about than in other communities. In future research we will be examining a different type of community to see whether these findings are community-specific or can be generalized beyond Riverview.

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