

# Timescapes Conference

Understanding & Supporting  
Families Through Time

**Families' experiences of working  
parenthood: the construction and  
negotiation of responsibility between  
parents and children.**

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**timescapes**

An ESRC Qualitative Longitudinal Study

# Working Parenthood and Responsibility

- 19 Minutes - How Long Working Parents Give Their Children (Daily Mail 19/7/06)
- Survey Finds Most Working Parents Want More Family Time (BBC News Online 24/8/10)
- I Had It All But I Didn't Have A Life. (The Observer 1/11/09)
- Parental responsibility : the 'task for a generation' (David Cameron)

## The Project: Work and Family Lives: The Changing Experiences of 'Young' Families' (2007-2010)

To explore how families reconcile work and family life over time, drawing on the changing experiences and perceptions of a sample of families with primary school-aged children, and to investigate processes of negotiation between parents and children in addressing issues raised by working parenthood.

- 14 families (16 children and 22 parents) located in Edinburgh and Lothians
- 9 couples, 5 lone-mothers
- 11 full-time, 10 part-time, 2 retired parents
- Household income from £20K - +£60K.

Three waves of data collection:

Waves 1 and 3: individual interviews (with parents and children)

Wave 2: family group interviews

# Outline

- Responsibility as 'being there': when worlds collide
  - Synchronization of work and family life
  - The tempo of work and family life
  - The blurring of the boundaries between home and work
- Implications of competing responsibilities
- Negotiating change
- Conclusions

# Synchronization

- Parents described feelings of guilt arising from the difficulties of synchronizing work demands with family life and vice versa.
  - The other thing is I think when you get to a certain level of work they expect you to be there when you're needed, so half my week I have to leave early, to pick them up...and sometimes you hear people saying, she's leaving and we're all still here (Emma Phillips)
- Children referred to wanting their parents to be around more and linked this to their attitude towards after school care.
  - I'd rather just get my mum just to get a now and again job....So she only gets three days work and then a couple of days with us...I would feel more - I'll feel less lonely. Because every time it's me and my granddad, but he hardly lets us out into the streets. Because he's - he says he's not very good at looking for us and doesn't want to be looking for us. So we have to stay in the garden and that's pretty boring (Ryan Clarke, 9)
- Being there (at home) is not necessarily being involved.
  - I think the reality is he does like me being in the house. Although he's never in. He just likes to know that I'm there (Julia Fisher)

# Tempo

- “Cram a lot into a day and a lifetime”(Nicci Rankin).
  - Work less hours and make them less tired...So I would try and get them to slow down and let them... but I'd let them for a couple of hours do what they want, go home, have a laugh with their family, see their family for a while and go back to work (Ryan Clarke, 9)
- Flash points of the day relating to work/school/home transitions when the responsibilities of work and family life come into conflict.
- Routines
- Children were very aware of parents' moods at these times.
  - I don't get a hug or a kiss and she just rushes off (Jack Erskine, 8).

# The boundary of work and home

- **Working from home**

- He [his son] says you're always on your computer and I do have to say, look not now I'm working..Like this morning I was working, twenty past seven he woke up and came through and...I was chatting away to him for a bit and I said, look Lewis you need to go away now because I'm trying to do some work (Graham Reid)
- So my dad looks after me after school on those days... But my dad's on the computer, so I just go in the garden or play with the Lego or something (Lewis Watson, 9).

- **'Catching up' on work**

- Once Mum was doing her work and I said, 'Can you help me with my knitting?' ...It's like she says, 'I'll do it once I've finished my work'. ..So when she did it I asked her, 'Can we do it now?' and she said, 'No it's too late. Brush your teeth, brush your hair and go to bed'....I felt a bit upset and a bit disappointed and I also felt, err, well let's just say I felt really dreary and I started to sob a wee bit. Cos it's like, she said she'd do it after she's done all this work, then when it comes to like she's finished, it's just too late. It's like you've lost a bit of trust. She said she'll do something with you, like then she just doesn't do it (Hannah Phillips, 11).

# Implications of Competing Responsibilities

- **Parents struggle to find a balance**

Sometimes you feel like you're not doing 100% as a parent, sometimes you feel you are not giving 100% to your work and it is just, it can be quite a stressful situation sometimes (Marie Wilson).

- **Dropping balls**

I forgot the tooth fairy money one night....and he came through in tears the next morning. The fairy didn't come! And that was a huge guilt mummy moment. It was just one of those things, I'd gone to bed at one, I was knackered, I was - I just forgot....And then I ended up the next night completely overcompensating and doing this teeny teeny teeny tiny note from the fairy, in tiny writing, apologising that she'd had a really busy night the night before and was very sorry. And he got two pounds instead of a pound. He was chuffed then. But for that morning, he came through in tears holding this tooth, my heart just sank. You know, because it seemed so important to him. ..because in the child's world, anything that's important to them is the most important thing. And the fact that you're sitting there doing tax forms and juggling house accounts and trying to pay bills until one o'clock in the morning and doing marking and forward plans and all that, and that you forgot a pound, it doesn't really matter (Rachel Erskine).

# ‘Flicking between the two’

My brain is constantly full of stuff!...you’ve got to think about what day of the week is it, does he have PE, does he have to take special stuff to school, what about school dinner money, what about play-piece, and then, you know, I’m at work.., so I’m back into work mode and thinking about work and then it’s back into mum mode and then I’ll be sitting later on and I’ll be watching something or making the tea and I’ll think oh gosh, you know, I’ve gone and forgotten to do something at work...you’re constantly flicking between the two (Gillian Nicholson).

# Support from children

- Complying with routines
- Helping with domestic chores
- Caring responsibilities - self care; care of siblings; care of parents
- Invisibility of children's caring

# The Negotiation of Change

- Negotiating responsibility
  - Calum Ritchie “a lot happier because of the responsibility” (Archie Ritchie)
- Responsibility, age and change
  - Transition to secondary school
- Restricted choices
  - It doesn't matter, I dinnae get to choose if I want to go or not (Ryan Clarke, 9).

# Understanding the negotiation of change

- **The normalisation of work**

- My parents going out to work, I don't think there's really anything wrong with it cos it's just what they do. And we have to go to school and it's just something that everybody does really so. There's nothing really bad about it (Calum Ritchie, 10).

- **Work as financial necessity**

- Well they would tell you that they would rather I didn't work and sometimes, you know, especially if it is a day they are not going to school, sometimes they'll maybe have a day off for whatever reason and I have to go to work, that can be hard; "Why do you have to go to work?" And then I remind them that if I didn't work we wouldn't get holidays and suchlike. I think they think "Oh well, okay, fair enough" (Marie Wilson)

- **Financial constraints on choices/change**

- And also the kids, you miss them during the day and it's just... like I said it's the best part of your life, it is, it hurts when you have to go away and not spend time with them but it's just the practicalities of living isn't it?(Archie Ritchie)

# Conclusions

- Responsibility is embedded in the family work project
- 'Being there'
  - has become a discourse through which contested responsibilities are presented.
  - represents a reality in which the competing demands on parents' and children's time is experienced.
  - reflects the contested responsibilities between different spheres of life and between parents and children.
- Responsibility and the family work project
  - Children as support and as challenge
  - Parents and children: Project partners?