Common Ground? Families and Employers has three primary foci: 1) understand and describe how parents’ employment is affected when caring for a child with a mental health disorder; 2) identify strategies used by parents to simultaneously manage employment and family responsibilities; and 3) identify workplace practices and policies that support employees who are caring for children with mental health needs. Although it is estimated that 5-10% of employed parents are caring for a child with emotional or behavioral challenges (Fernandez, 1990), inadequate resources are available to maintain a satisfactory fit between work and family responsibilities. Most notably, resources for family support are lacking.

Prior research conducted by the presenters indicates that parents, while resourceful, experience a serious lack of community-based services and resources necessary to support joining work and family obligations in a meaningful way (Rosenzweig, Brennan & Ogilvie, in press). Findings from the Support for Working Caregivers Survey identified a lack of flexibility in two significant work-family domains: childcare and education. Parents caring for children with emotional and behavioral disorders were forced to rely on employment adjustments to find any degree of balance in their work and family life (Rosenzweig, Brennan, Wuest, & Ward, 2002). Findings stress the importance of the community context and “family friendly” workplace policies and practices as a means of support for working caregivers.

Research in the area of work-life draws upon four key concepts: work-family fit, work-family flexibility, family support and community context. Work-family fit, a concept developed by Rosalind Barnett (1998)
refers to the degree to which an employed parent realizes the various components of his or her adaptive strategy for dealing with the interface between work and family. Fit as a process captures the tasks and decisions undertaken by the employed parent, in response to personal, community, and societal conditions, to achieve a sense of accomplishment and meaning in blending work and family life (Rosenzweig, J.M., Brennan, E.M., Wuest, L., & Ward, A., 2002). Whereas, fit as an outcome represents the degree to which an individual’s needs and aspirations are met by available options within the work social system and its larger context at any one point in time (Rosenzweig et al., 2002).

Emlen (1997) argues that each family achieves a balance due to flexibility in some part of the work/family/child care system. Parents of children with serious emotional and behavioral disorders report low flexibility in all three areas, pointing to the necessity for more family support resources. Families need assistance and resources to satisfactorily meet their goals, allowing parents to not be overwhelmed either by the needs or behaviors of the child with a disability or by the demands of the services designed to help.

Ultimately, family life and employment take place within the larger community. Understanding the interrelationships between family, work, and community are vital to strengthening all three. For example, “Documentation of community investment in family-friendly work environments attests to a community’s commitment to quality of life issues, a commitment which subsequently makes community more attractive to new businesses and economic ventures” (Secret, Sprang, Rompf, & Anderson, 2000, p.5).

PANEL DISCUSSION

The panel discussion provides a forum to begin a community dialogue about how best to support employed parents and those parents seeking work who are caring for children with mental health disabilities. Panel participants included two parents of children with emotional and behavioral disabilities, a local small business owner, and a human resources professional for a large local company. Each participant given two questions prior to the conference and asked to respond from their respective position: 1) What is your vision of a family friendly workplace for all parents, and 2) What do you think is needed from the community to help families with children who have serious emotional or behavioral disorders successfully fulfill both work and family responsibilities?

The parents on the panel spoke about significant challenges they faced finding, negotiating and maintaining employment while caring for a child with a mental health disability. Both parents discussed the frequency of phone calls from the child’s school and the need to leave work frequently to be available when their child was not able to stay in school. The parents commented on the constant responsibility of educating school personnel about their child’s disability and ways to effectively intervene with problem behaviors. Also noted were the schools’ lack of flexible meeting times to discuss the child’s needs. An ongoing concern for the parents was whether or not to disclose to an employer, co-worker or potential employer about the care needs of their child with an emotional disorder. Disclosure may lead to increased employer support and therefore improved work-family fit. Conversely, disclosure may incur stigma and judgement resulting in pressure to minimize critical situations when the child needs the parent to respond immediately during working hours.

Representatives from the employment sector discussed the availability of supports and services offered by many businesses. For instance, employee assistance programs and benefits such as job share or flextime are options that may be useful to employed caregivers of children with special needs. The panel members offered suggestions to parents about how to approach managers to discuss available options. They were also optimistic about the response parents would receive if disclosure of care needs was made to potential employers. The human resource professional commented that it was about “doing the right thing.” When an employer supports the individual needs of a family through flexibility, understanding, and providing the most support possible; the employing
organization gains through employee dedication, loyalty, and productivity. Together the employer and employee craft the family friendly work environment.

CONCLUSION

Prior research demonstrates that employed parents caring for children with emotional and behavioral disabilities confront unique challenges in balancing their work and family life. In particular, a lack of flexibility in the childcare and education pointed to the need for and extension in family supportive workplace policies. The conceptualization of work-family fit offered by Barnett (1998) provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding the experiences of this growing population of workers. Parents articulated very clearly the supports and services needed from the community to aid them in finding a meaningful balance in their work and family life. Employers offered strategies and family friendly employee programs that may be helpful to employed caregivers in negotiating their work lives. In this way, the dialogue that ensued from this panel provided all members with valuable information to take with them in their respective roles as a parent/worker, employer, or researcher.

REFERENCES


