Combining Employment and Caregiving: The Views of Parents of Children with Mental Health Problems


It is estimated that about one in ten employed parents care for a child with special needs, although this may be an underestimate since some parents may be excluded from employment as a result of their caregiving responsibilities. This study addresses a gap in the research by investigating work and family issues for parents of a child with a diagnosed mental health problem. Current knowledge of how work and non-work domains inter-relate does not reflect the diversity of today's workforce. This research broadens our understanding of the field of work-life research by including employees with significant care-giving responsibilities, in particular employed parents of children with mental health challenges.

The findings are derived from data collected from a series of five focus groups, each lasting about 90 minutes. Thirty-nine families, with a total of 106 children, 60 of whom had significant mental health problems, were recruited to the study from parent and family support groups, professional conferences, and service providers. Forty-one employees (36 women and 5 men), who worked for 30 hours or more each week, and who cared for one or more children with a serious emotional and behavioral disorder, participated in the focus groups. Seventy percent of the sample identified themselves as European American. The other ethnic groups represented were Asian American (15%), African American (3%) and other ethnicity (3%). Approximately half of the sample described their job as professional, while half worked in non-professional jobs. About one in three of the participants was a single parent, and eight out of ten reported that they earned a middle-level income. Only four of the participants reported that responsibility for child care was shared equally among both parents in the family.

The data was collected by two of the authors, who swapped the roles of facilitator and observer/recorder in different groups. Participants were asked general questions such as how their work life was influenced by having a child diagnosed with mental health problems, and how care for their children was managed during working hours. Probes were used for additional exploration of issues raised. The data were recorded and transcribed with permission, and content analysis was done using the Ethnograph software program.

Parents reported that the demands of caring for a child with an emotional and behavioral disorder had a major impact on their lives, including their employment. Examples of the consequences for work included having to work in jobs where they were underemployed and thus less fulfilled, having to work part-time, and declining opportunities that involved travelling. In addition to reduced choices in employment opportunities, many parents reported day to day challenges arising from the limited resources they had to support them in their caring responsibilities. Experiences included exhaustion, and frequent interruptions during working hours to deal with crises arising from their child's needs. Some parents felt that the ongoing problems had negative consequences for their ability to perform at work.

Most parents reported that resources for child care while they worked were scant or absent. It is notable, that within this sample, none of the children were enrolled in day care or after-school care, although a number had the experience of having their child excluded from this type of setting. A small number of parents obtained child care support as part of their eligibility for wraparound services. Obstacles to finding and maintaining child care included high costs and inability or unwillingness of providers to include their children. Families were largely unsupported and thus restricted to individual family arrangements such as sharing care between both parents, depending on older siblings, or paying for in-home providers. For many families, the costs of this type of individualized child care was prohibitive. In addition to the difficulty in finding before and after school care, parents also noted significant problems during school hours. Although in theory the children were cared for while at school, parents experienced several problems in the school setting. These included poor understanding of the child's condition, lack of responsiveness to the family's need by school personnel.
and lack of transport that could accommodate their child. Thus in addition to the demands that they were already juggling, parents often had to spend significant amounts of time during the day providing transport, dealing with crises at school, and 'training' school personnel.

The authors conclude by making several recommendations for social work interventions in the workplace, in schools, in child care, and in mental health care settings. Although these suggestions are primarily aimed at social workers, it is evident that they are relevant to a variety of professional groups, as well as to those involved in developing social and employment policy. While technological and other changes have contributed to greater fluidity in the traditional boundaries between work and non-work domains, policies and practices have not kept pace with the changing needs of employees attempting to combine work and family responsibilities. As this study illustrates, despite the ingenuity of families in adapting their lives, many barriers to combining the demands of employment and caring for children with special needs still exist. Thus, rather than receiving the support they need, many families are forced to try to accommodate to the structural and cultural boundaries that exist in schools, in child care, in places of employment, and in the many other systems that they come into contact with. It is clear that collaboration and change will be required at a number of levels to develop systems that are more flexible and better able to accommodate these families. An in-depth understanding of the experiences of employed parents that have children with mental health problems is an important first step in this process.

[Readers who are interested in finding out more about this topic may wish to visit the web page of the ongoing research program, available at http://www rtc pdx edu/pgProjCommon php]