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Time Society 2007; 16; 287

DOI: 10.1177/0961463X07080276

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Everyday Moments Finding ‘quality time’ in American working families

Tamar Kremer-Sadlik and Amy L. Paugh

ABSTRACT. American popular and academic discourses suggest that ‘quality time’ – conceived as unstressed, uninterrupted special time with children – is important for family well-being. However, such discourses often engender stress and guilt among working parents, who have difficulty finding time for ‘quality time’. This article explores the concept of ‘quality time’ in academic and popular literature (such as websites) and then draws on interviews and ethnographic video recordings of 32 dual-earner, two-parent American families to explore both perceived and lived experiences of family time. It proposes that everyday activities (like household chores or running errands) may afford families quality moments, unplanned, unstructured instances of social interaction that serve the important relationship-building functions that parents seek from ‘quality time’. **KEY WORDS** • ethnography • family well-being • quality time • social interaction • working families

Introduction

In American society, one often hears of the need to find and set aside ‘quality time’ (also ‘family time’) to enhance and maintain family well-being. It is presumed that this time – conceived as concentrated, unstressed, and uninterrupted – should make up in *quality* for what may be missed in *quantity*, primarily because one or both parents are away at work for many hours of the day. It also

presupposes that such time is to be spent engaged in scheduled activities or special events selected according to the child's (not the adult's) interests. The popular media encourages parents to make time for quality time that the whole family can share, and offers strategies for creating it, such as through special outings or family game nights. However, cultural pressures to achieve quality time may engender feelings of guilt among busy working parents for not finding enough family time, or when their efforts at creating quality time seem unsuccessful and 'forced' (Galinsky, 1999; Daly, 2001; Gillis, 2001).

This study explores the notion of quality time, and challenges the assumption that such moments of togetherness and relationship building are primarily achieved through blocks of time dedicated to 'special' family activities. First, we explore how quality time has been conceptualized in popular and academic literatures. In particular, we investigate a sample of websites that were retrieved by the online search engine google.com when we searched the phrase 'family quality time'. Then, we examine both perceived and lived experiences of family time as discussed in parents' interviews and documented in ethnographic video recordings of a week in the lives of 32 dual-earner, two-parent families in Los Angeles. Upon examination of the video data, we have been struck by the presence of what we call 'quality moments' in family life – spontaneous, unstructured, everyday moments of shared social interaction between family members. Although individual family styles vary, we find that quality moments occur regularly in the course of everyday activities and routines involving parents and children. These moments are often experienced by a subset of a family (e.g. a mother and son, or a father and daughter). Research has shown that social interaction between family members, even when not shared by the whole family, can help reinforce a sense of family unity and togetherness (Minuchin 1985, 2002). Though this is a preliminary study, we suggest that while not considered 'quality time' in its popular sense, these daily opportunities may enhance relationships and foster a sense of family identity and belonging among family members. We propose that quality moments are less likely to be noticed because they are not designated as 'family' activities and allocated into particular time slots. However, by ignoring these moments, and instead privileging more obvious family activities like sharing dinner or reading a bedtime story, we are neglecting the ongoing relationship 'work' that family members engage in through social interaction during *any* time together (e.g. Ochs and Schieffelin, 1984; Schieffelin, 1990; Tannen, 2003; Goodwin, 2006).

A Brief History of 'Family Time'

A review of western history tells us that, prior to industrialization, the concept of family was very different from the contemporary nuclear family model (two

parents and their children) (Kertzer and Barbagli, 2001–4). Households often included extended family members, as well as other community adults who worked in the home. High child and adult mortality meant that membership in families was often unstable. While children were often incorporated into the world of adults through work and childcare, they rarely spent concentrated periods of time with their parents. Industrialization (circa the mid-19th century) and the development of the middle class brought many social changes. Families moved to urban areas and began living in nuclear family households. During the same time, child labor laws and mandatory schooling for children were established in both Europe and the USA. These, historians suggest, helped separate children from the adult world of work, and establish the notion of 'childhood' as a distinct life stage (Ariès, 1962). The birth of 'childhood' and the notion that parents are responsible for caring for children throughout this life stage brought with it new ideas about parental nurture and the centrality of children to the family. Furthermore, it contributed to the development of the notion of 'family time' as different from time which family members spent at work or with other people (Gillis, 1996, 2003).

Paradoxically, Gillis notes, the notion that family time is in short supply dates from the same period it was created. Writings as early as 1838 reveal that parents worried about working fathers becoming strangers in their own homes. Gillis further observes that, in the past, leisure activity was viewed as unclocked time, which had no purpose beyond itself. In modern times, this way of life has disappeared. Leisure is now expected to be purposeful 'recreation': a set of activities whose function is to improve one's life, such as one's relationships, health, and skills (Gillis, 2001; Shaw and Dawson, 2001).

Along with changing ideologies of family time, beliefs about child rearing also began to change. Hays (1996) observes that in the 20th century, child rearing went through a process of 'scientification' with experts instructing parents through books and manuals how to raise a physically and emotionally healthy child. Hays (1996: 65) argues that these manuals 'contain an underlying moral condemnation of impersonal, competitive, market relations and a celebration of the importance of caring for others'. Thus, while previously time spent with household members went unmarked, after industrialization time when all family members were found together and engaged in purposeful leisure activities gained new meaning and importance.

Today, parents frequently claim that there is not enough time for family (Hochschild, 1989, 1997; Schor, 1991; Daly, 1996, 2001; Galinsky, 1999; Gillis, 2001; Milkie et al., 2004; cf. Southerton, 2003; Brannen, 2005). This experience is often linked to a modern shift in the meaning of time. The development of the clock and the abstraction of time into equal units devoid of meaning led to a shift in the perception of time into a valued commodity (Kremer-Sadlik et al., 2006). Marx (1867/1976) was the first to recognize that,

with changes in labor and economic theories, time became a resource to be traded, used, and spent. Further, the sense of 'time famine' today has also been attributed to a number of other social changes: the rushed pace of modern life; the increased number of dual-earner and single-parent working families; longer working hours; increased scheduling of children's activities; and, the rise of particular ideologies about parenting and 'quality time' (Daly, 1996). Many parents romanticize the 'good old days' when there was supposedly more family time (Gershuny, 2000), though researchers have shown that parents and children now have more free time than ever before (Robinson and Godbey, 1997). As Gillis (2001: 21) explains, 'family members do not calculate family time in the same way as do social scientists, and when asked whether they have more or less time for family, the response is uniformly negative'. In this atmosphere, it is no surprise that parents sense a strong ideological message that children should be compensated for their parents spending time away from home at work, and that such compensation should be, among other things, in the form of *quality time*.

Quality Time: Parental Ideal or Trap?

While the notion of 'family time' may have arisen during the Victorian age, the concept of 'quality time' appears to have emerged in the USA in the 1970s. The Oxford English Dictionary Online (n.d.) cites an early example from *Business Week* in 1977: 'The time they spend with their children is "quality time, not quantity time", say the mothers, echoing the claim of many executive fathers, and the children's home life is frequently more stimulating'. The Phrase Finder (n.d.) suggests that it entered popular usage in 1980s America: 'It came from the notion that parents can "have it all", i.e. a successful career and happy home life'. Some researchers of quality time suggest that it developed amidst a wave of academic (primarily psychological) research in the 1970s on interactions and time spent between mothers and their young children (e.g. Clarke-Stewart, 1973), indicating the initially gendered nature of the concept as women increasingly entered the paid workforce (Plionis, 1990). The phrase rapidly became established in academic and popular discourses contrasting families in which both parents worked with family types in which one parent, typically the mother, stayed home with the children.

To explore some of the discourses readily available to, and often generated by, the public, we searched the phrase 'family quality time' on the online search engine google.com. More than 4m entries were retrieved (28 April 2005). These included journal and magazine articles, advertisements, and special web pages posted by universities, government agencies, organizations devoted to family issues, and parents themselves. Out of these, we reviewed 60 of the top hits, identifying common themes or assumptions about parenting, childhood, and family.

In these widely accessible materials, 'time' becomes measurable in terms of *quantity* and *quality*. Quantity time is assumed to be the most desired kind of time, the 'norm' provided when one parent (presumably the mother) is a child's full-time caregiver. However, when parents cannot give their children *quantity* because of work, they are encouraged to give them *quality* time, largely by devoting time focused solely on children through participation in out-of-the-ordinary activities. The underlying moral implication of these discourses seems to be that working parents are not providing their children with the right kind or amount of time, as is evident in this definition of quality time found on The Phrase Finder (n.d.): 'A period of preoccupation a working parent engages in with an otherwise neglected child'.

A key aspect of quality time (evident across the examples) is that it is not to include anything else but engagement with the focal person, as highlighted in the following definition: 'Time devoted exclusively to another person in order to strengthen a relationship' (Compact Oxford English Dictionary Online, n.d.). To help ensure or restore well-being, parenting articles tell us that quality time should be 'worthwhile', 'dedicated', 'meaningful', and 'stress free'. Articles like 'Parenting skills: Family time management' emphasize the importance of experiencing time together with the *whole* family to achieve better relationships: 'Quality time needs to be made of a family, with every member of the household. With quality time spent, love will grow, and you will have stronger relationships' (eSSORTMENT, 2002). These quotes highlight one of the most discussed functions of quality time: to improve parents' relationships with their children (Kraehmer, 1994).

A corollary of this is that these meaningful blocks of togetherness should be scheduled through activities tailored to a child's age level and interests, often to the exclusion of parental interests and desires (cf. Daly, 2001: 291). Suggested activities include creating special occasions at home, such as a 'family game night', or going on special outings, such as taking a family vacation or going to movies, sporting events, theme parks, zoos, or the beach (e.g. Burtt, 1984; Kraehmer, 1994). Conversely, it is not suggested that parents simply plan to spend an afternoon at home with their children, though some authors do suggest that a few mundane activities, like cooking dinner or watching TV together, can be made into quality time. However, this requires that parents make a concerted effort to give children their 'undivided attention'. An article entitled '10 Ways to Make Family Mealtime Quality Time' (Familytimezone.com, n.d.) offers suggestions for making dinnertime 'special' and 'stress free': do not answer the phone or engage in 'loaded discussions', involve the whole family in preparing the meal and setting the table, sit together until everyone finishes eating, be 'attentive' to family members' actions and speech, and offer only positive comments to family members. The concluding sentence is: 'Make meal times a stress free time'. Though we certainly do not deny that dinnertime is a prime

context for quality moments with family members, these suggestions disregard the complex nature of family life and encourage parents to modify their routines beyond what may be regularly possible.

Those who doubt that quality makes up for shortness of quantity, on the other hand, claim that 'being there' offers more than any limited amount of quality time can. In a *Newsweek* article from the 1990s, one writer argues that quality time is merely a trope to appease parents' guilt and that they need to spend more 'quantity time' with their children: 'All we know is that whenever time with kids is in short supply, calling it "quality time" makes parents feel better' (Shapiro, 1997). Often, it is assumed that being a *full-time* parent automatically means being a *good* parent (Plionis, 1990), implying that those who rely on childcare must not be providing the best parenting to their children. However, others suggest that not all quantities are equal in quality. This is summed up in 'Attached and Working – Quality vs. Quantity Time':

[W]e all agree that you cannot cram a whole day's worth of love, values and discipline into one hour in the evening or into the weekend. Just as we can agree that it's not just physically staying home that means you are bonding with your child, but that what you do in the time that you have counts. (Boehnke, 1998)

Time – whether in quantity or quality – is assumed to be necessary in creating family togetherness and relationships, and for imparting critical knowledge to children. But beyond that, the debates continue as to whether quantity is the necessary ingredient, or if making the most of limited, yet quality, chunks of time is enough. Yet, such discourses are powerful (like other popular and institutional discourses; Foucault, 1980), and have become a dominant cultural trope that shapes the ways in which Americans conceive of parenting. Finding quality time has become a source of stress and guilt for many working parents, with parents who find it difficult to achieve quality time feeling that they fail as parents. Some respond with anger toward this cultural ideology and those who market it, such as parenting magazines and child-rearing advice books (Hays, 1996). As Daly (2001: 284) states, 'Family time is not only a descriptive term that offers a perspective on some aspect of family togetherness, it is a prescriptive term that directs families to act in certain ways.'

Our Approach: Family Time in Everyday Interaction

Planning special family activities and finding time to execute these plans are surely valuable. However, we propose that everyday moments of social interaction are significant in affording family members the opportunity to feel connected to one another and to enhance their sense of family well-being. In critically examining the notion of 'quality time', we suggest a shift in focus from

'blocks' of time devoted to the family, which parents often find unattainable (Daly, 1996; Schor, 1991), to the daily, unmarked, unnoticed aspects of family life. We draw support for this approach from research done in a number of fields within the social sciences.

The ecological perspective on human development emphasizes the importance of shared activities for the development of close relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Family relations, like other social relations, are established through routine practices and shared experiences that involve family members (DeVault, 2000; Garfinkel, 1967). These relations, DeVault (2000) points out, are sustained primarily through the invisible daily work of mothers and fathers (such as preparing breakfast, helping with homework, or saying good night). Family system research has shown that relationships between couples, siblings, and parent–children are interdependent and that the quality of relationships between individual family members influences the quality of the relationships of other family members, affecting the family as a whole (Minuchin, 1985, 2002; Stafford and Dainton, 1995; Lamb and Lewis, 2004). Social psychological approaches similarly highlight communication and spending time together as foundations for family strength and child well-being (Perlman and Rook, 1987; Larson and Richards, 1994; March, 2003). For example, Dixson (1995) found that strong conversation orientation is associated with children's higher levels of satisfaction with family life. She proposed that mundane social interaction (largely through conversation) is the building block of parent–children relationships (see also Duck and Pond, 1989; Duck et al., 1991; Dixson and Duck, 1993). That is to say, family well-being is enhanced by everyday interaction.

Discourse studies have also shown that daily social interaction, such as during dinnertime, is central to family relationship building, information sharing, collaborative problem-solving, child socialization, and constituting the family as a political and moral unit (Ochs et al., 1989; Ochs and Taylor, 1992, 1995; Ochs, 1994; Paugh, 2005, in press; Goodwin, 2007; Kremer-Sadlik and Kim, 2007). Through participation in everyday routines and social interactions as both active participants and observers, children are socialized into culturally specific orientations toward work, education, time, morality, responsibility, individualism, success, well-being, and what it means to be a family (e.g. studies on American working families: Ochs and Taylor, 1995; Paugh, 2005; Goodwin, 2006; Sirota, 2006; Wingard, 2006, 2007; Fasulo et al., 2007; Kremer-Sadlik and Kim 2007). Moreover, storytelling with family members socializes children to intellectual skills that are valued in mainstream American educational settings, such as critical thinking, perspective-taking, and metacognition (Heath, 1983; Ochs et al., 1992). Goodwin (2007) similarly found that through collaborative interactions in American working families, children are afforded 'occasional knowledge exploration', in other words, spontaneous opportunities

guided by parents for acquiring valued cultural knowledge and ways of learning about the world. Although such routine, unnoticed moments of everyday social interaction may not be viewed as quality time in its popular sense, they play a significant role in children's socialization into knowledge about their families and the world.

Data and Methodology

The data for our study was collected as part of an interdisciplinary research project conducted by the UCLA Center on Everyday Lives of Families (CELFF). Funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, CELFF's goal is to shed light on the everyday lives and struggles of middle-class, dual-earner American families, a group that was reportedly understudied in the work-family literature (hence single-parent families were not included). The CELFF study examines the everyday experiences of 32 families in which 2 parents work 30 or more hours outside the home per week. The families have 2 to 3 children (with at least one child between 8 and 10 years of age), own their home, and pay a mortgage on that home. The families represent a variety of ethnic backgrounds and reside in different neighborhoods within the Greater Los Angeles area. The majority of couples are in heterosexual partnerships, while two families consist of same-sex partnerships. All households in our study have an annual income of at least the median household income for Los Angeles (US\$45,958: US Census Bureau, 2004), with most families earning substantially more (70 percent earn twice the median income or more). Many of the households had at least one parent with a college degree (81 percent) and some with at least one parent with a graduate degree (41 percent).

Though there is an increasing body of literature on working family life, much of this relies only on interview and questionnaire data. We assert that in order to better understand family life and notions such as quality time, we need to examine and analyze naturalistic family interaction as it unfolds in everyday life. Our analysis relies primarily on ethnographic video recordings of everyday family interaction in and outside the home. For each of the 32 families, two videographers filmed family members on two weekdays from the moment they woke up until the children went to bed (no observation was done at work or school), as well as on Saturday morning, and Sunday morning and evening. Filming was done during the school year only. When family activities took members away from home (e.g. for children's extracurricular activities, running errands, or eating out), the researchers accompanied them. Approximately 50 hours of videotaped social interaction was collected per family. Videotaping was done by experienced videographers (including the authors of this article) who minimized the intrusion of cameras into families' lives by standing at a

distance from family activities and using zoom lenses and remote microphones (for further discussion of this method, see Ochs et al., 2006). In addition to the video data, our study analyzes questionnaires and recorded interviews with parents about families' daily routines.

We were drawn to the idea of quality moments as we began to notice that, among the families in our study, moments of social interaction demonstrating positive affect occur regularly in the midst of busy family life. Affect can be defined as 'a mood, attitude, feeling, and disposition, as well as degrees of emotional intensity vis-à-vis some focus of concern', such as toward a person or situation (Ochs, 1996: 410). Ochs and Schieffelin (1989: 12–14) suggest a range of linguistic features that may serve to 'key' positive or negative affect to others (Goffman, 1974; Hymes, 1971), including a range of grammatical, discourse, and paralinguistic features (such as eye gaze, posture, silence, laughing). Affect encoded in social interaction sets the tone for an interaction, and conveys information about social relationships and statuses. Positive affect is assumed in most popular and academic discourses to play an important role in the creation of quality time. Thus, we employ discourse analysis methods to examine displays of positive affect in mundane family interaction, suggesting that these quality moments may play a vital role in building a sense of family togetherness and identity.

Exploring Quality Moments

We found that many families in our study espoused the ideology of family time. When parents were asked to fill out charts that described their typical activities during the week, parents noted that while they worked on weekdays they engaged in special activities and outings with their children on weekends. In 28 of the 32 families, parents qualified their description of these activities with the word *family*, such as 'family movie', 'family game night', and 'family breakfast', or directly referred to these occasions as 'quality time'. The pervasive use of the label 'family' to qualify particular activities suggests that parents plan and demarcate particular *blocks* of time to be spent with the family. Yet, in spite of the clear preference for time with family, the same parents revealed that their desire is not always easy to actualize in practice.

In the following interview excerpt, Jeri, the mother of three children, ages eight, four, and one, explains that Sunday is their 'family day' (see Appendix 1 for transcription conventions; all names are pseudonyms):

(1a)

Jeri: Then on Sundays we try our hardest- it's definitely a family day to us. We don't leave each other, or the kids on Sundays unless we have to. I worked this past Sunday, but- but we usually do not leave each other on Sundays.

When asked what they usually do on those family days, Jeri lists special activities as family time:

(1b)

Interviewer: Do you stay home or go out?

Jeri: We go to birthday parties. We may have family commitments. We go to Santa Barbara Zoo. We take the drive to Santa Barbara Zoo.

Jeff, the father, then highlights that they try to plan events just for their family ('we plan for us'). Jeri echoes this by explaining that they occasionally refuse outside offers in order to keep their family days to themselves:

(1c)

Jeff: Usually. Yeah we don't usually plan much. We plan for us.

Jeri: We just try to, yeah, and we say no to people that ask us for plans sometimes.

At first glance, one might get the impression that these parents believe in the ideology of family time and also succeed in implementing it into their daily lives. Note the use of adverbs of certainty like 'definitely' and 'usually' to emphasize their commitment to and the regularity of those family days. However, a closer look illustrates that finding time for these activities is not that easy. Jeri qualifies their ability to turn Sundays into family days by explaining that they 'try their hardest', suggesting that it does not always happen. She also mentions that they do not leave each other 'unless they have to', which implies that there are competing forces that might not allow all Sundays to become family days. Lastly, she reveals that on the previous Sunday she had to work, demonstrating that their desire for family time had to be put on hold because of other priorities.

In another family, we again find the ideal of family time expressed but not easily achieved. Julia, a mother of two children aged eight and five, noted on her weekly routines chart that they have 'family time' on Sundays between lunch and dinner, from 1:30–5:00 pm. Julia's use of the phrase 'family time' and the marking of a specific block of time dedicated to the family give the impression that this is a well-defined and regular activity in the household. However, when discussing the family's schedule in a later interview, both Julia and David, the father, present a different version of a typical Sunday. David describes a tension between 'trying to relax' together, and having to attend to 'stuff we need to take care of', while Julia explains that the family's weekend schedule is dependent on the children's activities. She describes how very busy they were on the previous weekend:

(2a)

Julia: The weekends are a lot- often dictated by what the kids happen to have. For example, this weekend we were wide open until suddenly she had a

friend's birthday, and then he got invited to a birthday party. And if we make plans, they're bound to be disrupted that way. So we don't [plan] too much.

As the interview continues, Julia returns to their professed goal of spending the day together:

(2b)

Julia: Or we'll do- you know, we'll do something like go to a museum or something and- you know, *it counts as family time too*, it could be- yeah, there's a kids' museum. Who knows. We'll do something around town. But we kind of like to hang out at home, too.

Here, Julia questions whether going to a museum 'counts' as family time, and then clarifies that it is a '*kids*' museum'. Congruent with the quality time ideology, she suggests that family time will be regarded as such if the activity is clearly directed at the children's interests; not just *any* museum will do.

The contradiction between the desire for family time and the difficulty of achieving it reiterates previous claims that parents often have problems finding time for family (Daly, 1996). It appeared to us that part of the difficulty is embedded in the definition of quality time. That is, if time with family has to consist of blocks of time dedicated to special activities, indeed such times may be hard to come by. Yet, observations of daily family life suggest that families *do* have opportunities to interact during unplanned, unstructured time together – in other words, engaging in quality moments of positive interaction marked with affection and love that may aid in maintaining personal and family well-being. Psychological research has shown that certain family routines and events, such as mealtime and bedtime, are associated with positive child outcome and with the strengthening of family bonds (Fiese et al., 2002, 2006). We therefore recognize that events such as bedtime 'tucking in' and family dinnertime may be littered with quality moments, as these activities are often geared toward family connectedness (perhaps related to the quality time discourse that calls families to have dinner together to enhance well-being). However, we suggest that quality moments are less likely to be noticed because they are not recognized as stand-alone activities designated to maintaining or improving family togetherness. Instead these quality moments often occur during and in between other activities – a liminal period that in busy working-family life, seems more like 'suspended' time. Thus, in order to better understand that kind of family time, we turn to our video data of family interaction.

Finding quality moments in a busy schedule

The Reis family is a very busy family. The family's two children, Ally (age 8) and Mike (age 6) are involved in a number of extracurricular activities (each

child is involved in three sports and an academic program), which keep the whole family on the run throughout the week. When questioned in an interview, Pam, the mother, explains that though their schedule looks ‘totally out of control’ when written down, they still find time for non-scheduled activities and connecting with one another:

(3)

Pam: I mean- we know we’re busy. But when you actually write it down, it looks totally out of control. I showed that to people, and they couldn’t believe it. But it’s true! And you would think with that we wouldn’t have a second to even breathe! Its just life! You know? It’s not that big of a deal! I mean we just do it. We do lots of stuff in between that, even. I mean, you know, there’s still time for games and talking and reading, and I don’t know. It looks worse than it actually is.

We were very interested to see if indeed, as Pam suggested, they found opportunities to be together. When examining the family’s everyday activities, we realized that they did in fact find time to spend together, though it was often early in the morning. The following segment was filmed on Sunday at 7:00 am when the children awoke and joined their parents in bed (which they told the research team was a common weekend activity). They snuggled with Pam for about 50 minutes until it was time to run to two sports games (mother with son to his ice hockey game, father with daughter to her basketball game).

(4) Cuddling in Bed

((Pam, Ally, and Mike are lying in bed hugging and whispering. Jerry (father) is sleeping beside them))

Pam: *((Hugs and kisses both children’s heads)) ((Speaking slowly))* Today is your first basketball game.

Ally: I know.

Pam: Mmm. *((smiling))*

Ally: You’re not going to get to go.

Pam: *((Caressing Ally’s hair))* No::::. I’m probably not gonna get to go. I’m sorry about that. (.) *((Kisses Ally’s head))* But Daddy and Buba *((their grandmother))* will be there. OK? I’ll go to the next one, I promise. You’re gonna play amazing. Maybe Daddy can videotape it and I can watch it later. How’s that?

Ally: *((Nods her head))*

Pam: OK?

Pam uses this early morning opportunity to display love and warmth toward Ally and Mike. She keys a positive affective frame through physical actions, such as hugging, caressing, and kissing, as well as verbal ones, by bringing up a topic that is directly about Ally (‘Today is your first basketball game’). She

aligns herself with Ally and shows that she has confidence in her abilities ('You're gonna play amazing'). She exhibits concern and disappointment for not being able to attend the game through her tempered dispreferred response: 'No:::.. I'm probably not gonna get to go. I'm sorry about that'. She then reminds Ally that other family members will be there to support her, and suggests that 'daddy can videotape it and I can watch it later'. Further, she issues a promise to attend Ally's next game. Such intimate moments can reinforce children's sense of the care and concern that parents feel toward them and the special events in their lives.

Quality moments during household chores

We also found quality moments during engagement in household chores. In her daily chart, Marcella, mother of Jorge (age 10) and Nancy (age 8), described the weekend as a time for housework. In the following segment, she is folding a load of laundry in her bedroom. Marcella stands next to a pile of unfolded socks on the bed, when Nancy enters the room. Nancy sits down on the bed, puts a sock on her foot, and buries her foot in the pile of socks when Marcella is not watching. Nancy then challenges her mother to a playful game.

(5) Playfulness with Laundry

Marcella: ((Returns to the pile of laundry on the bed))

Nancy: Guess which foot is mine?

Marcella: ((Touches Nancy's foot within the socks)) Right
he:re.

Nancy: ((Laughs))

Nancy: Pull it out.

((Marcella tries to grab Nancy's foot while Nancy moves it away))

Marcella: ((Laughs)) You're [tricking me.

Nancy: [Pull it out. You have to.

Marcella: No. You're tricking me↑.

Nancy: No. You have to.

Marcella: ((Keeps folding laundry))

Nancy: You have to Mama. Which foot is mine?

Marcella: ((Playfully tries to grab Nancy's foot))

During this playful segment, Marcella, though focused on folding the laundry, acknowledges Nancy's request to play a short game as important and worthwhile. Both mother and daughter key positive affect through repeated laughter, and Marcella playfully refuses to try to touch Nancy's foot after she pulls it away: 'You're tricking me'. Though engaged in a household chore, the two enjoy a humorous shared moment where they exhibit positive affect, togetherness, and enjoyment of each other's company through joking, laughter, and playfulness.

Quality moments while waiting

Another occasion for quality moments is found when parents and children are in transition between activities, such as waiting for one activity to end or another to begin. A number of families in our study took advantage of such moments as opportunities for the spontaneous sharing of interests and ideas. For example, every Saturday the Gruvich family runs errands. Typically, the parents divide the chores, and each takes a child as they run to different locations. In the first segment below, Beth, the mother, and Tim (age 10) are at the car wash. While waiting for the car to be ready, Beth and Tim share a moment of interest in the toy model airplane that Tim built.

(6) At the Car Wash with Mom

((Beth and Tim are sitting on a bench outside))

Tim: Watch. *((Bends down to drive the airplane on the ground))*

Beth: *((Bends down to observe Tim))*

Tim: See? Look.

Beth: Very cool.

Tim: *((Straightens up))* Or-

Beth: *((Straightens up))* What do you call this, by the way?

Tim: *((Bends down to drive the plane))* The Vulture.

Beth: *((Bends down slightly))* The what?

Tim: The Vulture.

Beth: The Vulture *((laughing voice))*.

Tim: See? Look. *((Bends down to drive the airplane on the ground))*

Beth: *((Watches Tim))* You are an amazing boy.

Tim: Mom, look how it takes off. See?

((Tim straightens up and so does Beth))

Tim: The wings look like a vulture.

Beth: Does it take off vertically [or- or- regular?

(((Tim bends down and Beth follows))

Tim: Yeah.

The waiting period at the car wash allows Beth to show an interest in Tim's activities. She responds willingly to Tim's request for attention ('Watch') by looking at and asking questions about his toy. In doing so, she demonstrates her interest and awareness that the toy is important to Tim. Her question 'does it take off vertically or regular?' reveals that she is knowledgeable about what information is relevant to ask about the airplane, thus exhibiting an appreciation of Tim's hobby. She praises him with 'very cool' and 'You are an amazing boy', further offering a positive affective orientation to his interests. Their coordinated body posture similarly indicates their joint attention to the toy, as they bend down and straighten up in tandem. While this interaction is geared toward the child's interest, it is not an event that was planned to entertain the child (like

dominant definitions of quality time). It occurs while the mother is accomplishing a task for herself; yet at the same time, it enables her to share in one of Tim's favorite activities.

While Beth is with Tim at the car wash, Ray, the father, is with their daughter Becky (age 6) at the grocery store. In this segment, while standing in line waiting for their turn at the checkout counter, they share a moment of interest in greeting cards displayed on the wall.

(7) Shopping with Dad

((Becky stands on the shopping cart and Ray embraces her, holding the handle of the cart. He taps Becky gently to signal that she should get off the cart. Becky gets off and notices a greeting card on the wall))

Becky: *((Pointing))* A tulip.

Ray: *((Looks in the pointed direction))* A what?

Becky: A tulip *((Pointing))*

Ray: Yeah↑Beautiful.

(.)

Becky: Look at those flowers. *((Pointing))*

Ray: *((Looks at the cards))* Those are nice. Kind of like a tulip. Isn't it?

Becky: *((Moves towards the cards))*

Ray: With something in the middle of it.

. . . .

Becky: This one. *((Pointing at two cards))* The three of them. I like the three of them.

Ray: *((Returns to the cart))* Those are pretty.

Becky: Uh-huh.

((Becky returns to stand embraced by Ray while holding onto the cart))

This waiting period makes it possible for father and daughter to spend a moment looking at and sharing opinions about the greeting cards together. Becky selects the cards as the topic of attention and Ray actively aligns himself with her interest and thus validates it. He adds his own impression of the flowers on the cards, and uses other positive descriptive lexicon, such as 'beautiful' and 'pretty'. After focusing their joint attention on the cards, they return to standing in line, with Ray embracing Becky. Though it seems unremarkable and brief, this spontaneous moment of shared interest may facilitate the feeling of togetherness so desired by working parents. We believe that ignoring or not recognizing such moments (which are overshadowed by the quality time model) compound the sense of guilt that parents experience when special time 'en famille' is hard to find.

Discussion

These segments, like numerous others in our video data, illustrate how amidst everyday life moments, parents can find numerous opportunities to attend to their children, connect over shared interests, and have loving, caring moments. Though we have not yet begun to quantify quality moments, we were struck by the frequency of these kinds of spontaneous interactions during activities geared toward other goals (particularly during chores or waiting times) in our video data. Yet, for many parents, these moments may not 'count' as quality time because they are not oriented toward the family. But recognizing that family members experience quality moments in their everyday lives is valuable because it suggests that such moments can be experienced at any and all times. It offers an alternative to the scheduled event identified as quality time, which is at times accompanied by experiences of dissatisfaction and disappointment when such an event fails to meet expectations. We suggest that family togetherness is not necessarily or only achieved through time allocated to special 'quality' interaction and activity. Instead, we have shown that families can establish a sense of togetherness during their everyday routines when a parent and child have the opportunity to share time together. This may occur during such ordinary activities as chatting with a child about his favorite toy while waiting at the carwash, playing an impromptu teasing game while folding the laundry, or while cuddling in bed on Sunday morning.

Furthermore, there are indications that children do not attach the same importance to quality time as do adults, and that they may instead highly value those spontaneous moments of shared interaction in everyday contexts. In a survey of 489 children and ethnographic interviews with 70 children (ages 11–18), Christensen (2002) found that children view family time as occurring during everyday routines when parents are with them at home, are available to them, and allow them autonomy over their own time and space (see also Christensen et al., 2000). For example, one girl describes her family time as '... me and my brother do homework, and my dad does his work and my mum goes on the computer'. Christensen (2002:77) suggests that the debate over 'quality' versus 'quantity' time is based on 'assumptions of what would be "good" for today's children and neglects the perspective of children themselves'. Similarly, Daly's (2001: 289) study of 16 children (ages 4–5 years) found that children 'valued the opportunity to get off schedule and be with their family' on weekends without the usually rigid and busy schedule of weekdays. Interestingly, parents in many of the 28 single- and dual-parent families Daly interviewed also expressed a desire for more relaxed, free-flowing family time. Regarding quantity of time spent together, Galinsky (1999) found that 53 percent of working parents of children in grades 3–12 felt that they have too little time with their children, whereas only 32 percent of children felt the same way. Discrepancies between

parent and children's views of time together may be due to differences in experiences and definitions of family time. Parents, reflecting the ideology of quality time, feel that they achieve it when family members are engaged together in a particular recreational activity or event. Children tend to view time together as time spent 'hanging out' (Christensen, 2002). These findings suggest that we need to look seriously at everyday family interaction in order to better understand notions of family time. By allowing the boundaries between daily obligations like housework and errands to blur with family time, parents may be able to facilitate moments of togetherness that satisfy children's desire to just 'hang out'.

Our excerpts also reveal that often only a subset of the family (e.g. mother and son, father and daughter) participates in quality moments. Though family systems research recognizes the importance of independent relationship building within families (Minuchin, 1985), this finding does not fit the ideology of 'quality time', which assumes that such times should be experienced by the whole family simultaneously (e.g. see the statements by families interviewed in Daly, 2001: 288–9). Yet, acknowledging that quality moments can occur when only a subset of the family are together may free parents from a challenging burden of finding time together. Recall the family who told us that they 'usually do not leave each other on Sundays', but at the same time admitted that they often had competing obligations (like work) that took one parent away from the family. In fact, there may be differences in terms of time spent together between mothers and children, and fathers and children. While no systematic analysis was made of possible gender differences with regards to mothers and fathers engaging in quality moments, our data indicates that, in 76 percent of the filmed weekdays, working mothers were the ones to pick up their children from school and spend the afternoon with them doing homework, household chores, and errands (Ochs et al., 2006). This suggests that mothers had more time with children and more opportunities for quality moments together, while fathers were still at work.

While our research project examined a particular population of middle-class, dual-parent working families, we suggest that productive avenues for future research would include the investigation of perceptions of family time and the occurrence of quality moments in single-parent working families and in families in which one parent stays home with the children while the other works outside the home. Are there variations across family types, socioeconomic backgrounds, and ethnicities in the frequency or timing of quality moments, or in notions of what 'counts' as family time? More cross-cultural comparative research would also enrich our understandings of how families conceive of their time together, what they do during this time, and how it varies across sociocultural contexts, particularly in this time of globalization. For example, an ongoing comparative study of the notion of family time among families in Italy and the USA has

revealed differing views regarding what constitutes family togetherness and how it is achieved, and suggests that particular historical sociocultural conditions and beliefs shape these views (Kremer-Sadlik et al., 2006).

The present exploration of the notion of quality moments reveals that many everyday moments, though unplanned and often brief, afford family members opportunities to connect through displays of mutual interest and positive affect. We feel that this is important to recognize in light of the dominance in the USA of the 'quality time' model, which has shown to engender at times feelings of guilt among busy working parents for not finding enough family quality time (Galinsky, 1999; Daly, 2001; Gillis, 2001). Gaining an awareness of everyday quality moments may render parents' subjective experiences of everyday family interactions more positive and fulfilling, and offer researchers greater insights into the processes involved in creating and sustaining contemporary family life.

Notes

This study is part of an interdisciplinary, collaborative research endeavor conducted by members of the UCLA Center on Everyday Lives of Families (CELf), under the direction of Elinor Ochs. CELf is generously supported by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation program on the Workplace, Workforce, and Working Families, headed by Kathleen Christensen. The authors are indebted to the working families who participated in this study for opening their homes and sharing their lives. Additional information about CELf can be found on our website (<http://www.celf.ucla.edu>). This article is the result of the equal work of both authors.

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Appendix 1

Transcription conventions

- Cut-off or self-interruption
- : Elongated speech
- (.) Pause between utterances
- ((Action)) Non-verbal action
- (xxx) Unintelligible speech
- . Falling, final contour
- ↑ Rising intonation, question
- ! Exclamation
- [Overlapping speech

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