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Making it Work: How Working Parents are Changing What it Means to be “Involved”

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Working parents must divide their time between home and work responsibilities. In doing so, they synchronize calendars that often leave little margin for error. Every minute of every day is needed to cover the essentials.

As an education reporter and parent myself, I’ve heard the phrase “involved parents” bandied about like a possible panacea for all that ails the public school system. I’ve wondered how this discourse lands with the parents who aren’t as involved as they want to be. I asked a few of them: How much does work dictate what they can and can’t be involved with? Of those I asked, few have the time off or flexible scheduling to do more than essential parenting requires—which is already a lot! They had to develop a keen sense of what was and was not essential at work, at home, and at their kids’ schools—with little official guidance to help them.

Working moms America Espinoza, Sara Hernandez, Cameron Stutzman and Dolores Moreno-Valles know there’s often no such thing as a “regular schedule.” Or, if there is, it exists only to be interrupted by sickness and school holidays, leaving working parents scrambling for childcare or using their own vacation and sick days. Espinoza and Moreno-Valles both have experience with irregular shifts as well. Taking time off is not always an option for these moms, at least not if they need their wages to survive. The more irregular and inflexible each calendar, the more likely it is that either work or family life will suffer.

The Basics of Parent Involvement: America Espinoza

After decades of shift work and four children, America Espinoza has gotten used to “making it work.”

Espinoza works nights at the 24-hour call center for a public utility. Her husband works days in the logistics center at an oil and gas company, which allows them to be available for their 3 teenage boys still living at home.

“All of my kids were raised with me doing shift work,” she said.

Educators frequently remind parents like Espinoza that they need to be involved with their children’s schooling. There seems to be no limit to volunteer opportunities and ideas to enrich a child’s learning experience. The constant barrage of “involvement” opportunities left Espinoza and her husband wondering if they are doing enough—especially when they couldn’t say, “yes” to every opportunity. They aren’t alone. Research shows [many working parents](#) are left feeling like whatever they are doing and [whatever time they are spending](#), it should be more.

“I think that I spent almost their entire childhood with that guilt,” Espinoza said.

Even on the best of days—those days when nothing goes wrong at work or at home—she and her husband make careful decisions about how best to be involved with their kids’ schooling.

Extras like PTA and parent volunteering are “nice,” Espinoza said, “But sometimes you just can’t.”

Some educators have begun reframing the expectation that parents make a full-time job of volunteering at school and taking their kids to extracurricular activities.

Elsa Pennell is Director of Family and Community Engagement for San Antonio Independent School District, where most of the parents interviewed for this story enrolled their children. Knowing that parents in this high-poverty district are usually working with tight schedules, Pennell encourages teachers and principals to adapt their expectations and messaging.

“There are lots of things a parent can do,” Pennell said. Schools need three main things from families: reading to the kids, getting them to school on time and helping with homework.

Nevertheless, irregularities make even those basic things challenging. Kids—especially pre-school and kindergarten-age children—get sick. The [Canadian Paediatric Society calculates](#) that babies average about eight to ten cold viruses in their first two years, and the number often goes up when they start school or day care. When kids get sick or need them at school, the Espinozas use their own sick time and vacation time.

The New Normal is No Normal

In many ways, Espinoza considers herself lucky. She and her husband can count on a regular shift at work. Taking time off can be a challenge, but they do know what to expect. For others it can be more challenging.

As an increasing number of American families, [especially those who make at or near minimum wage](#), find that one income is not enough to support their family. [Wages in many places stagnate](#), and more families find themselves reliant on [multiple incomes](#), [side hustles](#) in the gig economy and any overtime pay they can get. All of that eats into what little margin is left in the work/life balance.

Getting By: Sarah Hernandez

Sometimes being involved is more than just regular irregularities. When children have extraordinary needs, parents need time away from work to advocate, protect and secure medical care.

Sarah Hernandez's work life was profoundly disrupted when her son needed to see a psychiatrist to confirm that he had a diagnosable learning disability. To get a diagnosis and treatment plan required conferences with his school, and it took months. She cleared the doctor visits with the HR department at the law firm where she is a file clerk, but one day her supervisor called her in and told her that she had 40 "discrepancies" on her time sheet. After HR cleared her, another manager had reversed the decision, and she had not been informed.

Her son's doctors then told her to apply for leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). Under this law, employees cannot face disciplinary action from their employers for time taken to care for the medical needs of family members. Taking advantage of FMLA meant that Hernandez could take her son to his appointments without losing her job. She filed the required paperwork, and it worked out, but she would never have known she was entitled to those benefits, had the doctor not said something. Her employer had never mentioned it.

It makes things easier in two-parent homes when both parents are able to ask for time off. However, Sarah Hernandez said that her husband, a truck driver for a beer and wine distribution company, was reluctant to ask, unsure if fathers would be afforded the same flexibility as mothers. Their concerns are [well-founded](#), researchers say. [Gender expectations still leave women with the majority of childcare responsibilities](#) in the United States and around the world. [Global research](#) is exploring how disagreement or imbalance in which a parent takes time off or asks for flexibility from employers creates [tension in many marriages](#).

When Work Doesn't Work: Cameron Stutzman and Dolores Moreno-Valles

For some parents, it becomes clear that their work situation [isn't allowing them to support their family in the way they feel they need to](#). They are bringing home a paycheck, perhaps, but the toll on their family is too high. If they are lucky, they can find a situation that allows them to [leave the workforce](#) without disastrous financial consequences.

Cameron Stutzman had to go back to work after her husband was furloughed from his job in the energy industry, a job that had just moved them to Missouri from Texas, away from their support networks. After six years staying home with her three children, she knew that her capacity for volunteering as room mom, field trip chaperone and other "extras" would change.

She went back to her job in the mortgage industry, and it wasn't long before she was putting in 60, 70, even 80 hours per week. Soon, she said, her absence began to show up in her kids. "They don't know what a conference call is, or a meeting is," she said.

"They don't know how it feels to start your day at 4am...All they saw was 'Mommy isn't what we know her to be.'"

The strain showed in her kids, ages 12, 7 and 5, one of whom has a learning disability.

"All of their personalities are exacerbated when I'm not able to be with them the way they need," she

said. She realized that she was barely keeping up with the essentials, and that things were not just falling through the cracks, but pouring through them.

Though she needed more flexibility, she said, “I was scared to ask for things.”

Then she injured her knee. The company offered her the ability to work from home, and with that came flexibility to do more with her kids when they needed her. Her husband returned to the oil field, and things have stabilized, for now. She was even able to leave her job. When she does go back to work, she said, she plans to look for part time work where she gets off at 2 pm. She doesn’t want any ambiguity about when it’s time to stop working.

Dolores Moreno-Valles doesn’t plan on going back to work, at least not for now. Sitting with Moreno-Valles in her living room, I can see little evidence of the life she is describing. The comfortable living room is decorated for Dia de los Muertos. Her young son falls asleep breastfeeding while we talk, and the whole house smells like horchata.

This is new for Moreno-Valles. The baby she’s holding is her third and the only one with her husband. Before this, she was a single mom, working the night shift cleaning hotel rooms, leaving her kids in the care of friends and neighbors. During the day, she did the best she could to stay involved in their education, but “a lot of stuff fell through the cracks.”

Like [many shift workers](#), she got her schedule week by week and was expected to adjust her personal life accordingly. If she couldn’t be there, she lost those hours and the wages that accompanied them. For those without regular work, they may need to pick up odd jobs and shifts whenever they become available.

She worked the night shift so that she could be there for her kids during the day without missing or swapping shifts, but as her son got older, nighttime was exactly the wrong time to be gone.

“My son was getting into a lot of trouble at that time because I was always working,” she said. “The cops were at our house every single day. But I wasn’t going to give up on his future.”

Moreno-Valles doubled up on mom-duty. The extra attention to her son took time away from work. Eventually she was down to 14 hours per week at the hotel and applying for government benefits, she said. Navigating that bureaucracy was like a job in itself, and the payoff for her efforts were minimal. The assistance didn’t even cover their groceries from week to week. She began depending on the San Antonio Food Bank, churches and community centers to plug the gaps in her grocery budget. Meanwhile, she was applying for more shift work in other service industry jobs – another time-consuming effort.

“Sometimes (government assistance) helped, but if it was enough I wouldn’t have had to go to the food pantries,” she recalled, channeling some of her former frustration. “If I had enough work, I wouldn’t have to be applying for more jobs.”

Her kids felt the emotional strain, and she thinks it affected them negatively. Emotional and spiritual support would have been vital at the time, she said.

When she met her husband, she did not think she would ever marry. It was never something she had wanted. But when she became pregnant with her third child, she agreed to get married, in many ways for the sake of her child. Her husband's university job offers benefits and stability along with a salary that would allow her to give up the shift work. Plus, she said, he was a great role model, the kind of man she wanted her kids to look up to.

"It's been a struggle all the way around," Moreno-Valles said, "but I'm really really grateful for where we are now."

Conclusion

Parents balancing work and family responsibilities are at the mercy of ever-changing circumstances. Sick kids, social-emotional struggles and academic challenges don't run according to the flexible time and PTO policies of a workplace. The resulting compromises are precarious for those with steady employment—almost impossible for those with irregular hours or just-in-time shift schedules.

Despite the near-universal nature of this struggle, few of the interviewees' (those mentioned above and others interviewed in the reporting process) workplaces proactively explained the benefits available to help balance work and family demands. While each interviewee said their workplaces were ultimately willing to work with them when they needed extra time off, the onus was always on the employee to ask.

The functionality of this informal system is largely dependent on the personality of managers and workplace culture—not codified policy.

Gutsy workers like Sarah Hernandez reaped the benefits of asking for more time, but even she feared it would catch up with her in the form of missed promotions or lower evaluations. Others, like Cameron Stutzman, didn't ask at all. She found herself sacrificing home for work, fearing she would be seen as unreliable or needy.

San Antonio ISD is one of a few school districts [rethinking parent involvement](#), but the conversation remains one-dimensional. It happens between parents and schools, without parents knowing exactly what their workplaces will allow. America Espinoza and Sarah Hernandez both had questions about what kinds of activities their employers would consider as meriting time off. Sporting events? Parent-teacher conferences? Class field trips?

All interviewees wanted to see the conversation about work-life balance placed at the forefront of workplace culture, based on a strong set of codified policies. They want to be well-oriented and reassured that a decision to prioritize their families would not result in penalties at work. They don't want to keep playing the zero-sum game where the rules are always changing, and the only reward is a guilty conscience.

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