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Family time



A busy Canadian lifestyle can pose challenges to one of the foundations that keeps our communities strong: families. With parents dealing with demanding obligations at work and kids managing homework plus busy extracurricular activity schedules, families are under duress.

Between balancing their work life and their family stresses, parents with young children are facing a difficult challenge, says Michele Nowki, director of disability claims and disability management, Desjardins Financial Security. "In the 2008 Desjardins Health

Survey, 89 per cent of Canadians said that they feel parents who work full time have overloaded family calendars; 88 per cent agree that parents who work full time have difficulty finding time to relax, and, 87 per cent agree that parents are under increasing social pressure when it comes to raising their children. Those three things alone indicate a significant amount of stress for working parents, even outside of the office."

Perhaps revealing conflicted feelings about parenting and life balance, 71 per cent of parents said they feel they do

too much for their children. "You can see that people are really struggling with working full time and being able to provide what they feel are the most important things for their children and for their families. Overwhelmingly, they feel that they have to do more, and so they can't relax," says Ms. Nowki.

According to the study, the struggle to balance work and personal demands is not confined to parents. "Adults in the survey reported that they're spending less and less time with friends and family members. As adults, we all have a

responsibility to manage and balance our lives, but somehow or another, we are not finding the time to enjoy simple things like spending time together, walking, talking, reading and enjoying each others' company without the feeling or the need to be doing or achieving."

"It's important that parents take more time for themselves and model for their children that being an adult is fun," says family psychologist Robin Alter, who says that in psychological assessments, kids are increasingly saying they don't want to have a family when

they grow up because it is too much work. "One of the reasons people have children is because kids are fun, but unfortunately, parents aren't often taking the time to just enjoy them."

Finding that time for enjoyment is essential, says Dr. Alter, because it is one of the most effective ways of building a child's self-esteem while helping parents alleviate stress. "I often ask (my patients), 'How much fun are you having? When was the last time you just had a good time with your kids - smiled, laughed, got silly?' From a child's perspective, the most important people are their parents, and if their parents enjoy them, they go away thinking, 'I'm a fun person - even my parents have a good time with me and they are the best people in the world.' They have a concept of themselves as a fun person because important people want to spend time with them."

That experience helps children learn social skills, do better in school and develop friendships. As a result, parents see their children are

developing normally, and feel they've done a good job - and therefore feel less stress. "Kids who have fun at home, and feel that their parents enjoy them, are actually more compliant. It's as if you accumulate some credit in the (relationship) bank that you can then draw on when you need them to do things that may be difficult."

Finding time to enjoy family life is ultimately the responsibility of parents, but employers who actively support work-life balance may enjoy greater employee loyalty and see less stress-related illness and absenteeism. "Employers need to understand the needs of their employees, look at their business objectives and their business goals, and then determine what strategies they can put in place that will both meet their business and human resources needs," says Ms. Nowki.

"Organizations that focus solely on business needs, without regard to human needs, are not going to be as successful. But organizations can't do it alone - it's definitely a joint responsibility."

Online resources offer parents insight, comfort

For parents, tuning into websites that offer the insights and experiences of other parents can provide user-friendly strategies - and the comfort of knowing you're not alone. Here are a few to consider:

- Today's Parent Magazine online (todaysparent.com)

has family-friendly mommy blogs, and a sampling of online articles include 'Make your job family friendly' and 'Easy holiday shopping.'

- Parenting.org provides information on web safety, developing social skills and a wealth of effective parenting tips.
- Homebasics.ca offers strategies on comforting your child, encouraging your children to read more, planning family-friendly travel - and even on decoding teen chic.

- At Briefcasemoms.com, coach Lisa Martin helps parents manage time and achieve balance.

- Parenting.com hosts a parenting blog populated by users with names such as 'Mommy Needs Coffee' and 'Rocks in my Dryer' as well as articles on managing life and family.

- For families facing financial as well as time pressures, The Dollar Stretcher at Stretcher.org hosts the stories of families finding ways to live richly while spending less.

Insight

Caring for Others — Caring for Ourselves

Dr. Taylor Alexander
CEO, Canadian Mental Health Association



changing rapidly, as more women enter the workforce, people move away to find work, and divorce rates increase.

A 2007 Statistics Canada report noted that over 2.7 million Canadians aged 45 years and over provided unpaid care to a senior, and one-quarter of these caregivers were themselves sen-

iors. Nearly 60 per cent of these caregivers were employed, and over 40 per cent were aged 45 to 54 years, likely with children at home, reflecting the 'sandwich generation' problem.

Since many physical illnesses have serious psychological effects, family caregivers often give mental health support, as well. A 2004 study by Decima Research estimated that about 500,000 Canadians were providing support for someone with a diagnosable mental illness at that time. About half had provided care for five years or more, mostly in their own homes. About 20 per cent were also caring for someone with a physical illness or disability.

And about 70 per cent felt they had no other choice but to provide this care because of inadequate services.

Some 58 per cent of Canadians feel role overload as they try to juggle work demands, family responsibilities, caregiving for family members and other obligations. Not surprisingly, the heavy burdens of caregiving can lead to burnout. To deal with these demands, caregivers can benefit from a wide range of supports, such as employment-related supports, financial assistance, improved health and social services, legal, financial and psychosocial support, and access to information and education, among others.

Family caregivers often just

'need a break' or time off, which may be difficult or impossible if there are no services to fill the gap. The 2007 launch of Ontario's \$700-million 'Aging at Home Strategy' is one such initiative designed to provide home and community care in innovative and flexible ways. Some organizations have called for a national caregiver strategy because Canada lags behind the United Kingdom, Sweden, Australia and New Zealand. Moreover, Canada is the only G-8 country without a national mental health strategy.

The demands of caregiving are worsened by increasing workload stress and overload. Fully 85 per cent of workers in a Desjardins

Financial Security survey agreed that employees work in a very stressful environment. Some estimate that employee burnout costs Canadian businesses \$12 billion per year. Work pressures increase the stresses on family caregivers who are already stretched to the limit helping family members and/or friends.

Clearly, a wide range of supports are urgently needed to help unpaid family caregivers cope and prevent burnout. Care for the caregiver must be top of mind if caregivers are to continue their invaluable, unpaid and often unrecognized work helping more than two million Canadians live with dignity and independence. ■

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