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## At Home

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The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

## CHAPTER 2 At Home

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**In *Fast-Forward Family: Home, Work, and Relationships in Middle-Class America*, edited by Elinor Ochs and Tamar Kremer-Sadlik, pp. 27-47. University of California Press, Berkeley. 2013. Please cite and refer to published manuscript – a spectacular compendium of ethnographic data on contemporary middle-class American families as studied by the Center on Everyday Lives of Families at UCLA.**

Family counselors, newspaper columnists, academic researchers—even bloggers—all agree on a core problem of contemporary American families: there is too much to do and too little time to get it done. One of the most salient findings documented by the broader CELF study is that young, dual-earner families are extraordinarily busy. A typical week for parents and their children includes at least five consecutive days of work and school, each so jam-packed with appointments, meetings, classes, after-school activities, and commutes that many families spend more waking hours apart than together. Although broader survey-level studies of time use suggest that families have more time together now than in the past,<sup>1</sup> other studies reveal that parents are increasingly concerned with the degree to which career choices and work-related obligations limit their ability to participate in daily life as it unfolds at home.<sup>2</sup>

Parents' perceptions of time shortages are partly a result of trying to cram more activities into limited windows of nonwork time.<sup>3</sup> Children are at the center of this scheduling whirlwind, and parents' increasing levels of involvement in children's lives have amplified subjective experiences of busyness.<sup>4</sup> A now standard—if not *expected*—middle-class practice of enrolling children in several after-school activities has cascaded into additional time commitments, including coordinating transportation, communicating with program leaders, maintaining parental social networks, monitoring child performance, and attending children's events. As Darrah argues, busier parents are not necessarily working harder or longer hours but instead are having to reconfigure their lives around a growing

number of bids for their attention before and after employed work.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, there is much evidence to suggest that parents perceive heightened levels of busyness as affecting how and *how often* they interact with their spouses and children.<sup>6</sup> However, what is not apparent in most previous sociological, psychological, and other formal studies of contemporary American life is how heightened levels of family busyness are affecting the lived experience of parents and children in their homes. Specifically, there is a dearth of ethnographic data that speak to daily life as it unfolds moment by moment in the home. To this end, the CELF study fills a gap in our much broader understanding of the “time crunch” in and among American families.

This chapter brings to light a unique data set that addresses how parents and children use unscheduled opportunities to spend time together when at home. These data were gathered with an ethnographic observation technique called scan sampling. Originally developed by ethologists, the method entailed an ethnographer walking through premapped home spaces at carefully timed intervals and systematically recording the specific location and activities of each parent and child.<sup>7</sup> Person-centered observations were recorded every ten minutes and are unique from our corpus of video data in that they reflect the simultaneous activities of *all* family members who were in the home, regardless of whether these people were captured on film (Figure 2.1).<sup>8</sup> The resulting data set provides important insights into the everyday lived experience of dual-income households: how often parents and children spend time with each other, where time is spent, and the mediating roles of home spaces and family possessions in the co-construction of life at home. Some of these data may be alarming in that they show a trend toward family member isolation despite ample opportunity for direct, face-to-face interaction. This has implications not only for parent-child affectional relationships but also for spousal intimacy. Other data, however, implicate new strategies for maintaining social and emotional bonds between parents and children in the midst of navigating within and between the spheres of work, school, and family life. And some of the CELF ethnographic

data complicate our normative understanding of gendered contributions to childcare.

**[Figure 2.1 here]**

Opportunities for parents and children to co-construct daily routines and achieve family-level cohesion are perhaps greatest when family members are within a thirty-second walk of each other in the home. But how often are these opportunities used, and how often do these opportunities arise? Few readers will be surprised to learn that most parents and school-aged children in dual-income households spend more weekday waking hours outside the home than in. Moreover, among the families participating in the CELF project, it was rare to find parents and children *simultaneously* at home on weekdays. In fact, only 687 (37 percent) of 1,840 scan sampling observation rounds on weekdays found all family members in their homes at the same time.<sup>9</sup> Not surprisingly, we consistently recorded two spans of time during which all members tended to be under the same roof: (1) in the early mornings, after parents woke up their children and before everyone left for work and school; (2) in the late afternoons and evenings, after family members returned home and before children were put to bed.

As might be expected, weekday mornings were somewhat hurried and almost always a little chaotic. Breakfasts needed to be eaten, lunches needed to be made, transportation logistics needed to be organized, and permission slips required signing. On average, it took seventy-four minutes for parents and children to accomplish these and other morning tasks before rushing out of the house. For some families, the morning routine was fluid and without complications. For most others, the experience was hectic: there was always competition for use of the bathroom, and there was little time for interactions that did not center on getting ready for school and ushering people over the threshold.

Opportunities for parents and children to be together on weekday afternoons and

evenings were largely determined by fathers' and, to a lesser extent, mothers' schedules. The return to home after work and school was often staggered over several hours. Mothers and fathers typically commuted to and from work in separate vehicles, sometimes transporting children to and from school along the way. In some families, children arrived home before either parent, having taken the bus, walked, or been met and transported by a nanny. In most families, mothers and children arrived home before fathers.

Fathers' later arrivals at the home were attributable in part to significantly longer work hours than those reported by mothers (Table 2.1).<sup>10</sup> But commutes also factored into parents' late arrivals. Across the United States the number of workers traveling more than two hours per day has increased significantly over the past decade, so much that the U.S. Census Bureau recently coined the term *extreme commuter* to characterize people who spend more than two hours on a *one-way* commute.<sup>11</sup> Among CELF families, the average duration of round-trip commutes reported by all parents was 105 minutes, or 1.8 hours. Some daily drives were as short as twenty minutes, but others were as long as four to six hours, qualifying as extreme commutes. Overall, longer workdays coupled with longer commutes may explain why fathers were usually the last to return home in the evening. Due to these late arrivals, and because most children were put to bed between 8:00 and 9:00 PM, it was not uncommon for both parents and one or more children to have fewer than four hours' opportunity for face-to-face interaction on returning home.

**Table 2.1. Parents' Average Daily Work and Commuting Time.**

|         | <i>Work (hrs.)</i> | <i>Commuting (min.)</i> |
|---------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| Fathers | 10.1               | 60.2                    |
| Mothers | 8.6                | 45.4                    |

## When under the Same Roof

The cumulative time demands imposed by work, school, extracurricular activities, and commuting are now sufficiently immense as to prevent most or all family members from physically reuniting until well after the sun has set. Given the short span of time separating parents' homecomings and the point at which children are put to bed and given parents' growing concerns with spending time together as a family, one might expect parents and children to maximize the time they spend together as a group when under the same roof. Of course, the simple act of being at home does not guarantee that family members will spend time in the same room. Furthermore, even if parents and children are in the same room, they may or may not interact. There are many responsibilities and activities—not the least of which are homework and work-related tasks—that affect decisions about where family members locate themselves in the home. Indeed, such decisions can result in parents and children at opposite ends of a floor plan.

Even so, members of most families in the study rarely *if ever* came together as a group in the home. When all members of each of the thirty families were at home (and awake) they congregated in the same home space, on average, for only 14.5 percent of scan sampling observations. Although there was some important variability among families, most tended to spend less rather than more time together as a group. In half the families studied ( $n = 15$ ), parents and all children were together in the same room in fewer than one in four observations. In as many as eight of the other fifteen families, parents and children *never* shared space as a group at any point in time. Only in two families did both parents and all of their children come together in greater than 40 percent of all weekday observations.

These low instances of families coming together may in part be attributable to family-specific circumstances that make it difficult or merely improbable for parents and all of their children to be in the same space for very long on weekday afternoons and

evenings. We observed, for example, some parents putting infants to bed several hours earlier than older children. This staggering of children's bedtimes afforded fewer opportunities for the family to come together as a group. Nevertheless, even when the definition of "together" is expanded to include instances in which both parents and one or more (but not necessarily *all*) children were in the same room, the average rate at which families shared a home space was only slightly higher (25.9 percent vs. 14.5 percent).

Of course, sharing space with others does not always translate into social interactions. Indeed, some of our observations of parents and children reflect transient uses of home spaces rather than sustained group activities. That is, at the point of recorded observation, sometimes parents and children were simply walking through the living room (often in different directions) rather than participating together in a conversation or activity. In fact, while the rate at which both parents and at least one child came together in a room was typically low, the rate at which they also co-participated in an activity while sharing space was even *lower* (18.7 percent of observations, on average, when all family members were at home).

This additional layer of data—the activities in which parents and children co-participate when together—provides some insight into the socially centripetal and centrifugal effects of particular activities at home. After categorizing all focal activities recorded with scan sampling observations (Figure 2.2 and Table 2.2), we found that the most common shared activities were eating, communication, and leisure. In fact, CELF data indicate that these three activities accounted for over 75 percent of the observations when both parents and their children were simultaneously sharing space and focusing attention on the same activity. In contrast, activities classified as chores, childcare, and schoolwork ranked fairly low when both parents and one or more children were in the same room. These latter three activities occupied a more significant portion of families' schedules when mothers or fathers spent *one-on-one* time with their children.

[Table 2.2 here]

[Figure 2.2 here]

The number of observation rounds in which we documented one parent and one or more children sharing space greatly outnumbered the number of rounds where all family members were together. Often we observed parents simultaneously spending one-on-one time with children. That is, mothers were documented spending time with a child in one area of the house (e.g., the kitchen) while the father was with another child in a different space (e.g., the living room). However, hands down, mothers spent significantly more time with children. Our scan sampling data reveal that mothers shared space with one or more children for an average of 34.2 percent of observations on weekdays, whereas fathers shared space with children in only 25.1 percent of observations (Figure 2.3).<sup>12</sup>

[Figure 2.3 here]

Differences in mothers' and fathers' contributions to raising children and performing routine housework is a hot topic among researchers addressing family life in the United States. This is attributable in part to the persistence of gendered roles in routine domestic work in spite of the fact that more women are working full-time jobs outside the home. After working a full day at the office, women appear to still be saddled with a greater proportion of that which Hochschild labels "second-shift" work,<sup>13</sup> including house chores and a range of activities that revolve around the care of children, including monitoring schoolwork.

Nevertheless, characterizing inequities in mothers' and fathers' daily contributions to dual-income households is increasingly a complex task. Some researchers argue that a focus on domestic work in studies of gendered household roles should be replaced with an adaptive partnership model, or an approach that considers the *totality* of contributions.<sup>14</sup>



Bianchi and colleagues, for example, use time-diary data to demonstrate that men's and women's total contributions to the household—including the sum of childcare *and* paid work outside the home—are roughly equivalent among contemporary dual-income families.<sup>15</sup> In general, these findings resonate with patterns observed in CELF questionnaire and scan sampling data. That is, most fathers worked more hours than mothers outside the home (see Table 2.1), but most mothers took on a greater proportion of household chores.<sup>16</sup>

However, it is important to note that parents in CELF families spent time with children in qualitatively different ways. The data in figure 2.4 show that when fathers engaged with one or more children, the most popular activities were “leisure” (27.9 percent of all activities shared with children), “communication” (25.7 percent), and “childcare” (19.9 percent). In contrast, mothers were more likely to have participated with their children in “childcare” (30.3 percent), “communication” (21.7 percent), and “leisure” (13.7) activities. In fact, the average sum of *nonleisure* activities with children (or “household maintenance,” “chores,” “communication,” “childcare,” and “schoolwork”) for mothers (76.6 percent) is notably higher than that for fathers (62.5 percent).

**[Figure 2.4 here]**

The age of a child can certainly affect the frequency and type of parental investment, with infants and toddlers typically requiring the greatest energy and time expenditures. When child age was factored into the analysis, we found that fathers with children age five or younger did not spend significantly more or less time sharing space with their kids or more or less time alone than fathers with older children. In short, having younger or older children seemingly did not affect how often fathers spent time with their kids. In contrast, mothers with young children ( $\leq 5$  years old) spent significantly less time alone than did mothers with older children ( $> 5$  years old).<sup>17</sup> Seemingly, the greater demands made on

CELF parents by younger children fell mostly on the shoulders of mothers.

Overall, when compared to mothers, CELF fathers spent less time with children and a proportionally greater amount of time interacting with their kids in leisure activities. These findings are neither new nor surprising; other researchers have revealed similar patterns concerning fathers' behavior at home.<sup>18</sup> Clearly, if we apply the adaptive partnership model and take into account the differences in parents' employed work hours, then fathers in the CELF families appear less like shirkers and gender inequities in household contributions are less striking.

A key assumption of this model, however, is that the family is a self-balancing system in which mothers and fathers adjust their labor contributions in concert with one another.<sup>19</sup> That is, if mothers increase their paid work hours outside the home, then fathers will increase their time spent with children.<sup>20</sup> Yet CELF survey and observational data do not support this idea. In fact, among the thirty families studied, there was a moderately strong negative correlation between the number of hours mothers reported spending at work each week and the proportion of observations in which fathers were present with children on weekdays.<sup>21</sup> In other words, the more mothers worked outside the home, the less fathers shared space with children inside the home. Incidentally, there was no correlation between the number of hours fathers worked outside the home and the time they spent with children.

But in families whose mothers worked more hours than their husbands, were the roles reversed? That is, did fathers who worked *less* than their spouses take on a greater share of the childcare at home? Among the thirty families studied, only seven fathers reported working fewer hours than their spouses, and, on average, they did not spend comparatively more time at home or with their children. When compared to fathers who reported working *more* than their spouses ( $n = 22$ ), the seven fathers were home earlier and more often on weekday afternoons but did not spend a significantly greater proportion of time at home with their children. These patterns were the same across all weekday

afternoon and evening observations and not just those when all family members were in the home.

Much of the CELF scan sampling data do not support an adaptive partnership model, at least not in ways that help us to better understand differences in how and how often mothers and fathers spend time with their children. Even when their wives earned more money, most fathers still did not spend more time with children. Using surveys of much larger American and Australian populations, Craig has shown that even when mothers and fathers spend equivalent amounts of time with their children, mothers still shoulder more of the work at home by virtue of being better at multitasking.<sup>22</sup> It would seem that in spite of a growing awareness of gendered differences in contributions to childcare, including time spent with children, as well as the emergence of the ideal of father as co-parent,<sup>23</sup> fathers still are not contributing as much to childcare as mothers when at home.

These generalizations, however, are based on sample *averages*, and a more nuanced analysis of our scan sampling data suggest that fathering practices are slowly changing. For example, despite differences in average time spent with children by mothers and fathers, there is much variability in the extent to which fathers shared space with one or more children. In nine families, fathers spent *more* time with children than mothers, and in three families fathers and mothers shared space with children in an equivalent number of scan sampling observations. In another three families, the difference between mothers' and fathers' time with children was less than 10 percent. All in all, fathers in nearly half our sample spent almost as much, the same amount, or more time with children as mothers. This finding would not have surfaced had we focused only on sample averages.

In a similar vein, we found that although mothers spent overall more time with children, they spent proportionally less time *engaged* with their children when compared to fathers (77.1 percent and 85.5 percent, respectively). That is, when fathers shared space with children, they were more likely than mothers to engage their kids in various activities. Importantly, leisure did not always dominate father-child time together. Again,

although the *average* amount of leisure time fathers enjoyed with children is greater than that for mothers, the extent to which individual families vary around this mean is of interest. In fact, fathers in as many as twenty of the thirty families spent proportionally more of their interactive time with children engaged in nonleisure activities. These data complicate otherwise normative depictions of mothers' and fathers' unequal contributions to raising children.

### **Parents Alone and Alone Together**

Parents' desires to spend more time with their children may be strong, but parents also seek the occasional "me" moment, or a portion of time to carve out for themselves and maybe some one-on-one interaction with their spouse. This sentiment is compellingly captured in the 2004 film *Before Sunset* when Ethan Hawke's character reflects on married life with children: "I feel like I'm running a small nursery with someone I used to date." Children can significantly affect opportunities and motivation for spousal intimacy.

Before children were put to bed at night, working parents rarely spent time together without one or more children being present. On average, parents were in the same room without a co-present child in fewer than 10 percent of observation rounds when all family members were in the home, and they shared an activity in only 7.6 percent of these observations. On those few occasions when they were alone together, parents' shared activities included communication (33.3 percent of parents' shared activities), chores (28.1 percent), and leisure (26.3 percent).

These findings resonate with the results of other studies of how U.S. parents spend their time at home. Survey data, for example, suggest that the time working parents spend together without children has declined from twelve hours per week in 1975 to only nine hours in 2000.<sup>24</sup> The underlying reasons for this trend are not clear, although we might speculate that longer work hours are intruding on quality spousal time. Yet among the

thirty families in our study, there was no correlation between the time mothers and fathers individually spent at work and the amount of time they spent with their spouses on weekdays (without children present).

The extraordinarily small amount of time parents spent together without children likely speaks volumes to the substantial time demands made on parents by children and household chores. With so many bids for their attention when children were at home and awake, parents saw little opportunity to spend quality time with their spouses. That said, and when children were not around, we were surprised to observe mothers and fathers alone far more often than together. In fact, we recorded both parents *simultaneously* alone (e.g., the mother was in the living room while the father was in the garage) in home spaces in an average of 15.2 percent of weekday scan sampling observations. Simply put, spouses often spent more time alone than together before kids went to bed, even when both parents were at home.

Of course, parents may have spent more time together after kids went to bed and after we left their home. Nevertheless, these “simultaneously alone” times were missed opportunities for spouses to reconnect, and these data may indeed implicate social withdrawal—perhaps resulting from a combination of job-related stress and the stress of working so hard at home—as an explanation for diminished time together.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, stress and the reaction to it may be differentially experienced. When all family members were at home and awake, fathers were found in home spaces without co-present spouses and children significantly more often than mothers (38.9 percent vs. 29.9 percent, respectively).<sup>26</sup> In fact, we observed fathers alone in home spaces more often than any other person-space combination (see Figure 2.2). That is, fathers were more often alone than with one or more children, whereas the opposite was true of mothers. When fathers were alone, they tended to prioritize “leisure” activities (19.5 percent of fathers’ activities when alone), followed by “chores” (18.8 percent) and “communication” (17.7 percent). In contrast, when mothers were alone, their three most common activities were “chores”

(35.4 percent), “communication” (12 percent), and “CELF tasks” (11 percent).

## The Centrality of Kitchens

When family members came together, regardless of who was involved, they usually came together in the kitchen. Interactions involving both parents and one or more children, in particular, were often located in kitchen spaces. Similarly, mothers' and children's time at home often coalesced in the kitchen. Kitchens, in general, were one of the most frequently trafficked and intensively used rooms in families' homes, despite the fact that these spaces tended to be small and highly compartmentalized.<sup>27</sup>

The popularity of kitchens as frequented loci of parent-child interactions is also reflected in a study of American families by researchers at the University of Chicago Center on Parents, Children, and Work. Using time-diary survey methods, Chicago researchers found that the majority (42.3 percent) of instances in which both parents and one or more children shared space were documented in the kitchen.<sup>28</sup> Of note, these data came from a much larger sample of American households than that addressed by the CELF study. Although the University of Chicago study generated only a fraction of the observations that the CELF study recorded for any particular family, the time-diary data on kitchen use reflect trends across 465 families in as many as eight U.S. cities.

Sample size aside, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that kitchens play a centripetal role in families' everyday lives at home. Some of this evidence emerges from our ethnographic observations of in situ family interactions and activities. For example, the bulk of children's homework and parents' off-hours from employed work transpired in kitchen spaces. Children in many of the families had access to desk spaces in their bedrooms but regularly rejected these spaces in favor of kitchen tables for doing homework.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the location of the table rather than any intrinsic features of the table itself was crucial to children's decisions about *where* to do homework. In eleven of the

twelve houses that featured two multiperson tables—a large table in a formal dining room and a modest-size table in the kitchen—the smaller table in the kitchen was always the more frequently used. In fact, in twenty-five of thirty single-family homes, one of the two most intensively used home spaces—often the kitchen—contained a modest-size table.

Kitchen tables were typically nexuses of activity on weekday afternoons. These were also anticipatory spaces, or places to stage any number of objects that anticipated activities outside and beyond the home. Photographs of these surfaces on weekday mornings reveal backpacks, lunchboxes, homework, papers, and other objects staged for transport to school and work. On weekday afternoons and evenings, inventories of these surfaces reflect a new assortment of laptops, keys, mobile phones, mail, and new homework. The cycle of artifact depletion and renewal would begin the next day as parents and children returned to this hub of family life.

Other data sets, in particular those that address family material culture, also compellingly show that kitchens and the objects they contain play a central role in parents' choreography of family time. Refrigerators are among the most important of these objects. Aside from functioning as cold repositories for food, refrigerators are multisurface bulletin boards to which all things pertaining to the scheduling of working family calendars are attached. Over half the families in our study used between 45 and 90 percent of the total visible surface area of refrigerators for posting calendars, school lunch memos, to-do lists, and the like. Some families displayed as few as five items on refrigerator surfaces; others posted up to 166, with an average of 52 objects attached to each appliance.<sup>30</sup> As many as 104 calendars were documented in the kitchens of twenty-nine families, and the majority of these were attached either to refrigerator surfaces or refrigerator-adjacent cork boards.

Clocks are also important. Despite the ubiquity of digital clocks on various appliances (e.g., coffee makers, microwaves, ranges), many parents hung large, analog clocks on walls that could be most easily viewed from nearly every vantage point in the kitchen, especially the kitchen table.<sup>31</sup> This intentional saturation of kitchen spaces with

clocks, calendars, and other scheduling-related items implicates a family-level concern with monitoring the use of time in relation to a host of individual and collective obligations. The frequent co-occurrence of these objects also implicates a concerted effort on the part of parents to organize children's attention to the management of time and to build participatory frameworks for achieving numerous tasks related to work and school.<sup>32</sup> Materially, kitchen assemblages index a culture of busyness that has come to define middle-class families in the twenty-first century.

### **Measuring Family Togetherness**

There is a growing body of research suggesting that active participation in the daily routines of life at home is critical to forging affectional bonds between family members, nurturing positive social values in children, and discouraging maladaptive behavior in adolescents.<sup>33</sup> There is also evidence that American parents (and not just social scientists) are drawing connections between notions of family happiness, well-being, cohesiveness, and time spent together. In fact, many dual-income parents are now gauging their *quality of life*—a social and economic measure of household well-being and life satisfaction—in terms of family cohesion and warmth.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, being together is an important quality of family cohesion when cohesion is viewed as a characteristic of an ongoing, enacted process between family members.<sup>35</sup>

That members of most dual-earner families spend more weekday time outside the home and apart than inside and together is chief among a constellation of factors impeding unscheduled opportunities for parents and children to co-construct daily routines. Among the thirty families that participated in the CELF project, we found there were typically fewer than four waking hours during which both parents and one or more children simultaneously were at home on weekday afternoons and evenings. Parents' work schedules, children's school schedules, and myriad extracurricular and sports-related



activities committed parents and children to a life more apart than together for five days of the week. Opportunities for togetherness were limited in particular by parents'—especially fathers'—late arrival at the home on weekday afternoons.

Our analysis of scan sampling data did not reveal a correlation between the amount of time parents spent with children and the number of hours parents worked each week, despite long workdays and long commutes. Nor was there a correlation between parents' commute time and time spent with children. The simple fact of the matter is that longer workdays and longer commutes cannot be definitively linked to parents spending more or less time with children among the families that participated in the CELF study.

Nevertheless, given the short span of time in which parents and children were under the same roof, we might expect family members to have spent a good deal more time together when they finally did return to the home. Instead, we found that the extent to which they shared home spaces and activities was highly varied and sometimes infrequent. Of course, an underlying assumption made throughout this chapter is that emotional connections are forged and maintained when two or more people are in close proximity, such as when they share a home space (e.g., a living room).

It is important to note that over the past two decades Americans have witnessed a proliferation of electronic and digital devices marketed as helping families keep in touch during the course of an average weekday. Mobile phones, text messaging, and instant messaging via computers, for example, are increasingly incorporated into busy parents' strategies for staying in touch with their families. At the time of our study, major cellular phone networks were running television ads that depicted American moms extolling the virtues of text messaging and "family-share" cellular service plans for staying connected with their spouses and children. As recently as 2007, married couples with school-aged children had higher rates of cell phone usage and subscription to broadband computer services when compared with other household types.<sup>36</sup> However, at the time of our visits to CELF project family homes (2001–4), many of the devices available today, such as the

iPhone and the BlackBerry Smartphone, were not available, and texting was less common. Importantly, very few of the children who participated in the CELF study had their own mobile phones.

Technology aside, it is unlikely that many of today's parents would concede that phone calls or text messaging are emotionally gratifying substitutes for face-to-face interaction with loved ones, especially those with whom they live. Yet amidst the hustle and bustle of daily life, the problem for many parents is finding time for these face-to-face interactions. For most dual-income families with school-aged children, opportunity for parents to reconnect with each other and their children is often limited to brief windows of time that bracket daily work and school schedules. This was definitely true for CELF project families, most of whom also had to contend with the reality that there was so little weekday time when all family members were at home and awake.

Yet by linking notions of family cohesiveness to measures of spatial proximity we also may underestimate the importance of other practices, such as parents maintaining availability and temporal flexibility.<sup>37</sup> Certainly, among the families that participated in the CELF study, parents and children infrequently came together as a group in the home, but children often shared space with individual parents. Given the high mobility of family members in the home, these findings suggest that frequent but intermittent interaction between parents and kids is one strategy for reconnecting while simultaneously attending to ever-present schoolwork, dinner preparation, laundry tasks, pet care, and numerous other household obligations on weekday afternoons and evenings.

It is worth noting that low rates of family congregation in home spaces may not be solely attributable to decisions on the part of parents. That is, although analyses in this chapter assign primacy to parents' decisions about where to locate themselves when at home with their spouse and children, the low rates of group congregation may also be attributable to children's decisions. For example, some of the times when mothers or fathers were observed alone may have been the result of children leaving spaces in which

parents had otherwise actively positioned themselves to interact with them. A more nuanced analysis of the scan sampling data (with an emphasis on tracking sequential movement of family members) is necessary before we can address intentionality in people-space combinations.

Importantly, scan sampling data cannot be used to gauge the emotional tenor and quality of time spent together. Other CELF researchers compellingly show how video recordings are better suited to questions addressing the emotional tone of verbal and nonverbal interactions in everyday family life.<sup>38</sup> Our analytic emphasis on close proximity as a measure of togetherness also may not be an accurate reflection of family members' *perceptions* of togetherness. Merely being under the same roof as their children, for example, may be just as emotionally gratifying for parents as being in the same room. In the same vein, parents sharing car space with children may have used commutes as opportunities to "check in" and reconnect on some emotional level.<sup>39</sup> Back in the home, the act of being in *conjoined* home spaces (e.g., contiguous family room and kitchen spaces) also may have resulted in perceptions of togetherness similar to those achieved by sharing a single space (e.g., just the family room). Many of the single-family residences in our study were small (less than 1,500 square feet) midcentury homes that were subdivided internally into numerous small spaces, thus making it difficult for families to comfortably come together as a group while attending to a wide range of afternoon and evening activities.<sup>40</sup> Yet although the layout of walls and other architectural features in these small homes play a role in families' decisions concerning interactions and activities, there is no clear relationship to discern. On the one hand, if the analysis of scan sampling data were broadened to include instances in which family members were situated in contiguous spaces, our yardstick of togetherness—spatial proximity—would reflect a higher measure of interaction among the thirty families. On the other hand, because the houses of most CELF project families were highly compartmentalized, being in contiguous but separate spaces often meant that family members could not clearly see or hear each other.

Nevertheless, many of the patterns in families' use of time on weekday afternoons and evenings evident in the scan sampling data are not apparent in data sets generated with broader time-use surveys, questionnaires, and/or time-diary methods. Notably, CELF scan sampling data show that simply being at home does not mean that members of dual-earner families are spending that time together or that parents are spending a majority of time at home with children. Indeed, our ethnoarchaeological data suggest that patterns of family interaction are far more complex than those suggested by other time-use studies addressing American families.

Scan sampling data also reveal that kitchens in single-family homes are the nexus of family communication, child socialization, and logistical organization. These were also spaces in which children repeatedly located homework activities on weekday afternoons and evenings, despite having ample desk space in personal bedrooms. This patterned behavior suggests that children seek to maximize contact with either or both parents as other activities, especially food preparation, unfolded in kitchen spaces. Although the time that both parents and all children spent together as a collective was limited, the number of interactions between individual parents and individual children were numerous. Assessments of family togetherness or cohesion may require that we rethink the significance of brief albeit frequent interactions between children and parents over the course of their limited time together at home.

Our data also show that mothers spent considerably more time with children than fathers. However, the differences in how and how often mothers and fathers spent time with their children suggest that we cannot view parents' contributions to the household in terms of a simple ledger sheet on which employed work hours are balanced against time spent on childcare. Simply put, the ledger sheet does not balance, and neither employed work hours nor income help to explain the disparities in mother's and father's contributions to childcare. Of course, fathers' behavior in some families more or less exemplified some long-standing and normative depictions of fathers as semipresent

parents who make only modest contributions to daily childcare. However, the time that fathers spent with children was highly variable among the thirty CELF families, and fathers in approximately half the families spent as much (if not more) time with their kids than mothers. In light of recent generational shifts in how fathers *talk* about parenting,<sup>41</sup> with more parents voicing awareness of gendered disparities in childcare and household work, these ethnographic findings may indicate important changes in “on-the-ground” fathering practices in the twenty-first century.

Finally, although other time-use studies suggest that married couples are spending more time at leisure than ever before,<sup>42</sup> dual-earner parents in the CELF study rarely spent time together without their kids before kids went to bed. In the few instances in which we did observe mothers and fathers alone together, they were more likely to engage in interactions centered on household logistics and chores rather than leisure. In the span of time between families’ return to the home and the point at which kids are put to bed, kids place substantial time demands on parents. Then again, parents may intentionally try to maximize the amount of waking time spent with children, and spouses may spend more one-on-one time together after children go to bed. Given that family members tend to spend more time apart than together on the average weekday, CELF parents strived to maintain and reinforce affective relationships with their school-aged children. After all, sharing space with children, even if only for a moment, is a strategy for improving on perceptions of otherwise diminished time together.

## Notes

1. E.g., Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie 2006; Robinson and Godbey [1997] 1999.
2. Jacobs and Gerson 2004.
3. Gillis 2006.
4. Gergen 1991; Gutiérrez, Izquierdo, and Kremer-Sadlik 2010; Kremer-Sadlik and Gutiérrez, this volume; Zeitlin et al. 1995.
5. Darrah 2006, 383.
6. Brannen 2005; Hochschild 1997; Kremer-Sadlik, Fatigante, and Fasulo 2008; Kremer-Sadlik and Paugh 2007; Southerton 2003.
7. Details on variation in person-centered observations and scan sampling methods can be found in Broege et al. 2007; Campos et al. 2009; Graesch 2009; Klein et al. 2009; and Ochs et al. 2006.
8. Over the course of two weekday visits with the thirty participating families that featured both a mother and a father, CELF ethnographers completed 1,840 short walks (or observation rounds) through family homes and recorded 8,248 observations of parents and children in their home spaces.
9. For the thirty-family data set, there were 2,942 person-centered observations recorded when all family members were simultaneously in the home.
10. Independent samples t-test;  $t(52) = 3.80$ ,  $p = .000$ , when outliers (Families 13, 20, 31) were removed from the analysis.
11. Pisarski 2006.
12. Paired samples t-test;  $t(29) = -2.597$ ,  $p = .015$ . These observations do not include instances in which mothers *and* fathers shared space with one or more children.
13. Hochschild 1997.
14. Craig 2007b; Meissner et al. 1975.

15. Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie 2006.
16. Klein, Izquierdo, and Bradbury 2007; Klein, Izquierdo, and Bradbury, this volume.
17. Independent samples t-test;  $t(28) = 2.12, p = .043$ .
18. E.g., see Beck and Arnold 2009; Broege et al. 2007; Coltrane, Parke, and Adams 2004; Craig 2007a.
19. Craig 2007b.
20. E.g., Bianchi 2000; Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie 2006; Crouter and McHale 2005; Peterson and Gerson 1992.
21. Pearson product-moment correlation;  $r = -.39, p = .03$ .
22. Craig 2007b.
23. E.g., Pleck and Pleck 1997.
24. Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie 2006, 104.
25. Repetti, Saxbe, and Wang, this volume.
26. Paired samples t-test;  $t(29) = -2.61, p = .01$ .
27. Graesch 2009.
28. Broege et al. 2007, 142.
29. Graesch 2006, 2009.
30. Graesch 2009.
31. We documented 76 digital clocks in the kitchens of 32 homes.
32. E.g., see Goffman 1981; Goodwin 1994; Murphy 2005.
33. E.g., Crouter et al. 1990; Fiese et al. 2002.
34. E.g., Coontz 2005; Mintz 2004; Stevens et al. 2007.
35. Ochs et al. 2006.
36. Kennedy et al. 2008.
37. Budig and Folbre 2004.
38. Campos et al. 2009; M. H. Goodwin 2007; Goodwin and Goodwin, this volume; Ochs and Campos, this volume.

39. E.g. C. Goodwin 2006.
40. Graesch 2004, 2006.
41. E.g., Pleck and Pleck 1997.
42. Voorpostel, van der Lippe, and Gershuny 2009.

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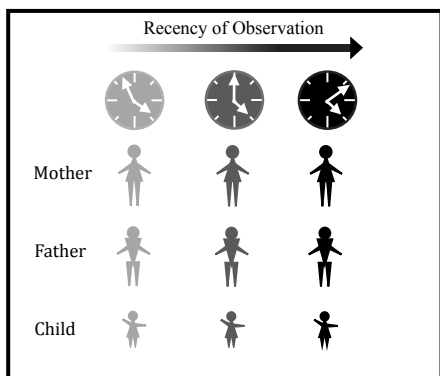
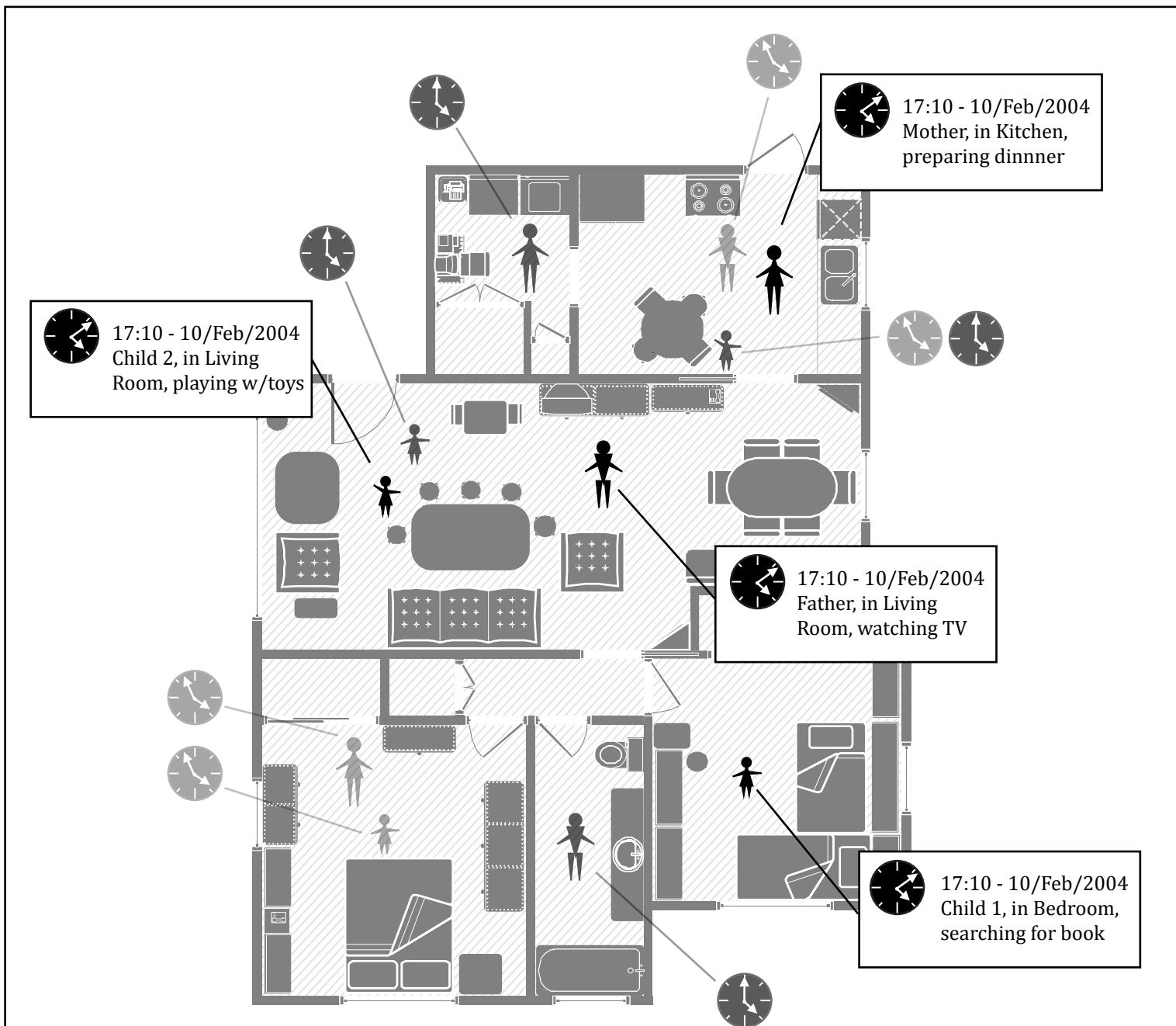
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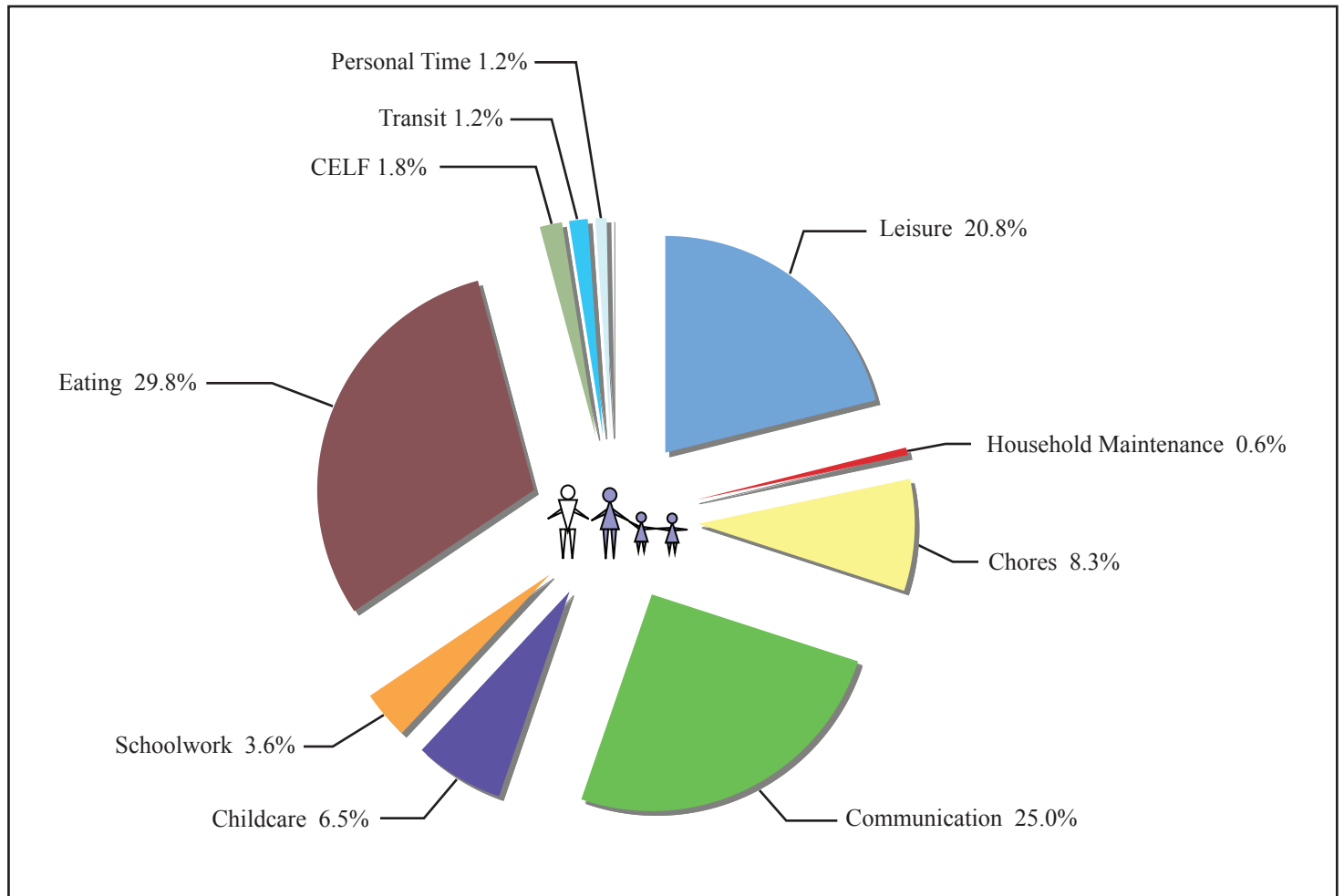
### Highly Mobile Families

After all family members returned home, parents and children gathered in numerous person-space combinations. When I embarked on our very first visit to a family’s home, I was surprised to learn just how mobile parents and children could be over the course of an evening. Although many activities were localized in kitchens, I observed family members moving between spaces so frequently that I abandoned our initial plan to record observations every 20 minutes in favor of a 10-minute sampling interval. Even this scan sampling strategy could not fully capture the frequency at which parents and children moved between spaces and engaged in different activities.

**Figure 2.1. Weekday time at home.**

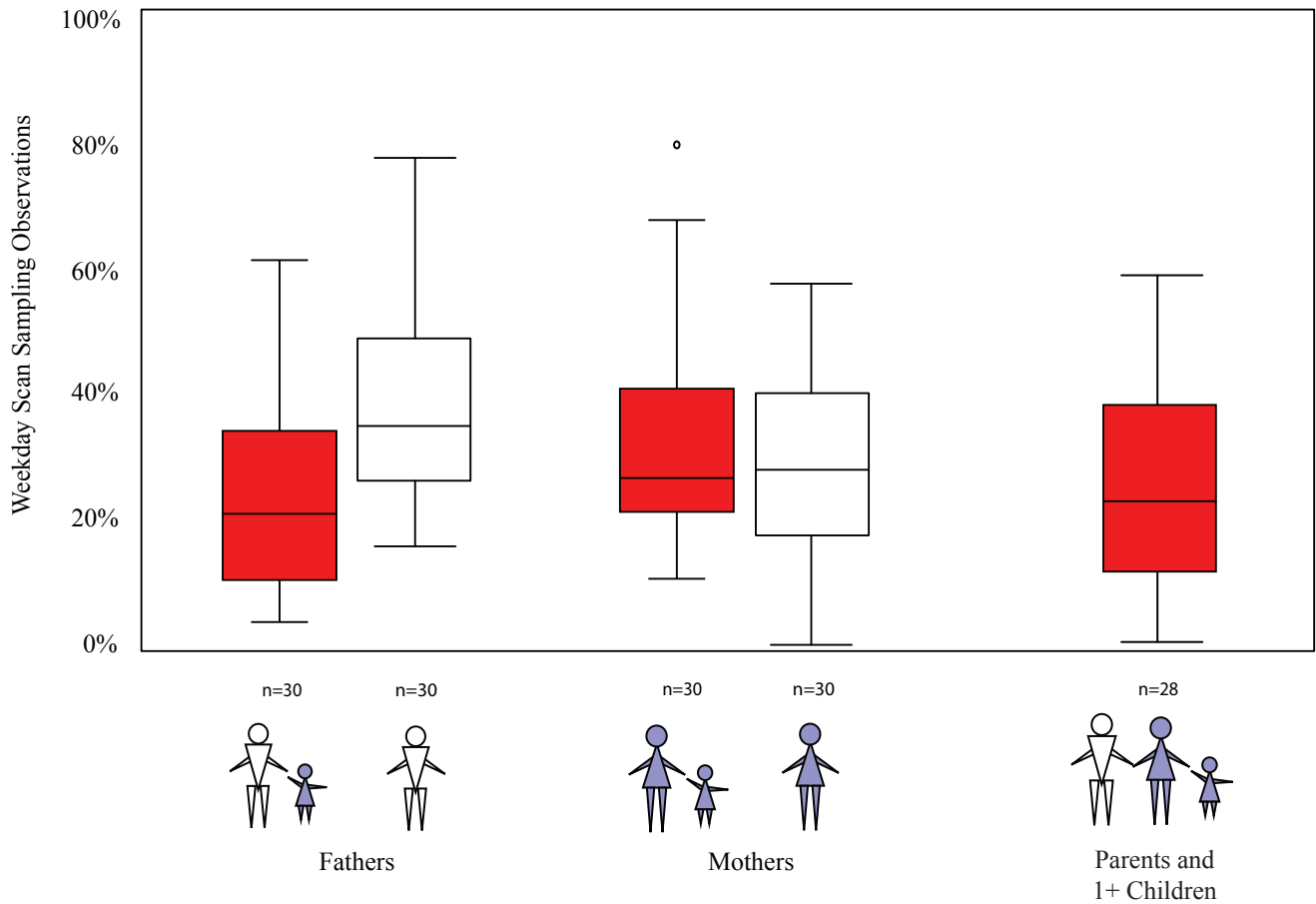
**Table 2.2. Classifying activities.**

| <i>Activity Category</i>   | <i>Examples</i>   |
|----------------------------|---|
| 1 Leisure                  | watching TV; playing; reading; playing video games                                |
| 2 Household maintenance    | opening mail; paying bills; planning renovations; remodeling                      |
| 3 Chores                   | cleaning; taking out trash; preparing meals; mowing lawn                          |
| 4 Communication            | talking or listening to family members; talking on phone; emailing friends/family |
| 5 Childcare                | feeding, bathing, dressing, or grooming child; reading to child                   |
| 6 Schoolwork at Home       | doing homework; checking homework for accuracy; assisting with homework           |
| 7 Work at Home             | emailing work-related contacts; any activity pursuant to the goals of employers   |
| 8 Eating/Snacking/Drinking | eating breakfast, lunch, or dinner; snacking or drinking between meals            |
| 9 CELF Activity            | filling out questionnaires; saliva sampling; talking to researchers               |
| 10 Spousal Relations       | hugging, kissing, or massaging spouse   |
| 11 Transit                 | walking or running through home spaces  |
| 12 Personal Time           | sitting and doing nothing; staring out window; napping                            |
| 13 Personal Care           | brushing teeth; combing hair; grooming; showering                                 |



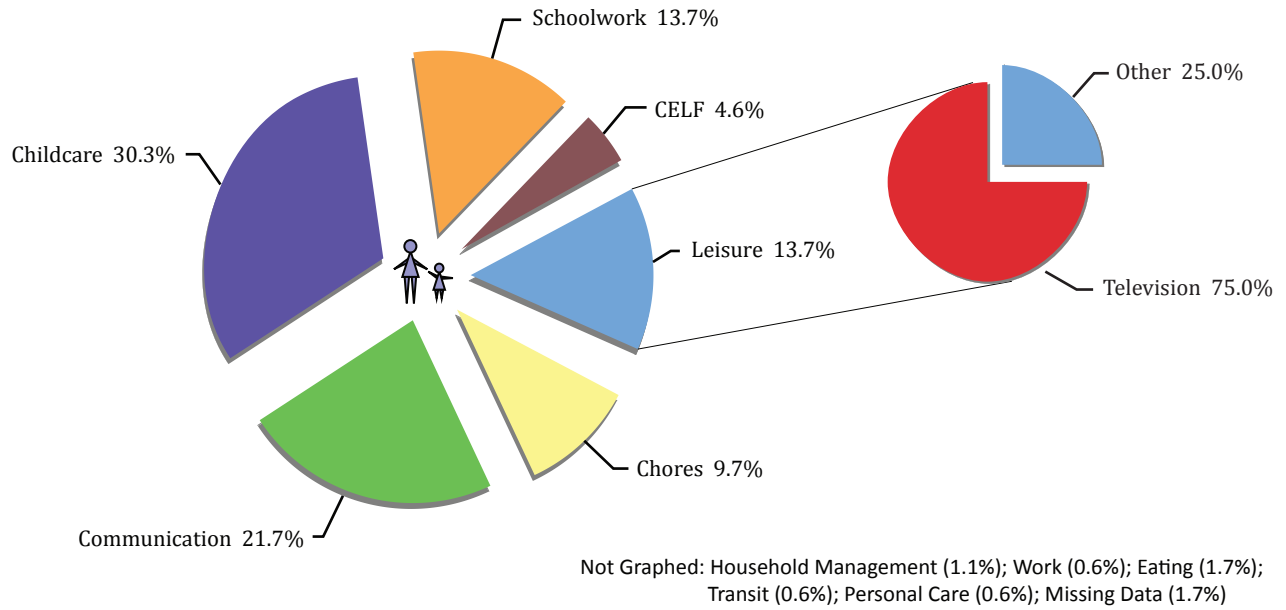
**Figure 2.2. Parents' activities with children at home.**



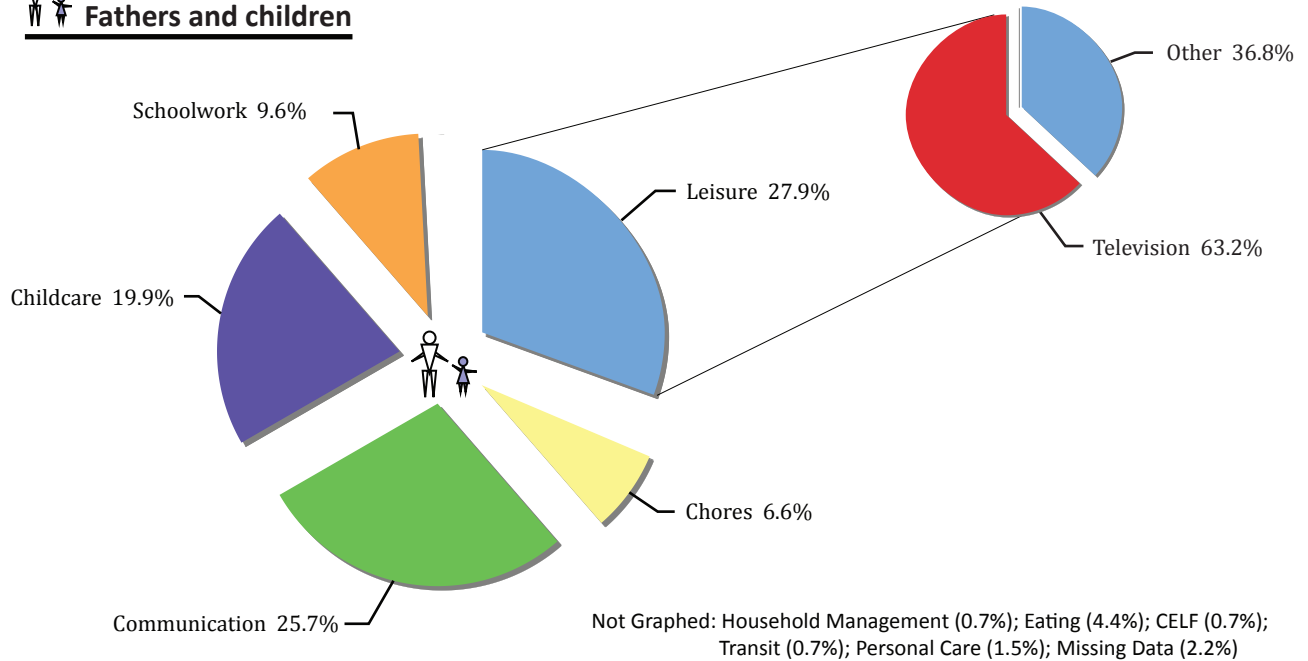


**Figure 2.3. Mothers' and fathers' time with children, alone, or with spouse and children on weekday afternoons or evenings.**

 **Mothers and children**



 **Fathers and children**



**Figure 2.4. Mothers' and fathers' activities with children at home.**