

## Getting to 50/50

### EXCERPT

#### *Chapter One*

#### *Mom and Dad: How Kids Can Get More from Two Working Parents*

Why count sheep when you can count your worries? Your child . . . your job . . . your spouse . . . his job . . . your marriage . . . your child . . . your job . . .

Will getting to 50/50 let you sleep carefree? For us, that hasn't happened yet. But we toss and turn much less because we have good company, spouses who are equal players in the parent game. The many couples we've interviewed say the same: "It's worth it-especially for the kids."

The thoughts that keep you up at night start early. On a popular morning show, a parenting guru shakes his head. "You need to be there when your kids get home from school." (Does he mean you?) As you kiss your kids good-bye, you see a flier from the library: "Children's Story Hour: 11 a.m. on Mondays." You've never gone. "Would my daughter enjoy that? What is she missing?" you wonder as you shut the front door.

Midday, there's an e-mail from school. "Your son writes numbers backwards. Please practice at home." How, you wonder, will you wedge that in on weeknights? Your 3 p.m. meeting started forty minutes late and the Little League game is at 5. You said you'd be there and, as your son likes to say, "a promise is a promise." You arrive at 5:45 and the game is in progress. You sit down as your son goes to bat. The ball soars and he runs all the way to third base. He sees you and smiles-but you wonder why every day feels like such a fire drill. What about that guy on TV this morning: Are your kids getting shortchanged? You start calculating how your family could get by on one income (not yours).

Then your husband grabs your hand and whispers: "Don't worry, I got here early. See what a little batting practice will do?" He smiles proudly as your son's foot hits home plate. Yes, your kids sometimes bring store-bought treats for the bake sale. But if you craft family life to give your children what they need . . . does it matter?

As working moms who care about our kids, we've taken a hard look at this question and learned many eye-opening things. We've read the research-and interviewed many experts who conduct it-to understand what the science really says. We've also gathered the stories of working parents (and their grown kids), who share their experiences complete with ups and downs. It turns out that children can gain a lot when both parents work: independence and self-confidence, cognitive and social skills, and strong connections with two parents-not just one. First, though, let's talk about an issue that can lead to more sleepless nights than a newborn: the question of child care.

#### *The Truth About Child Care: The Kids Are All Right*

If you played with dolls as a little girl, you'll recall the game had one rule: Babies need their mommies.

As you prepared to have your own child, you heard the same message, but the sentences got longer and the words got bigger. Experts talked about the human brain and the first few years of life, about how a child's emotional and intellectual development hinged on a mother's total involvement in these crucial early stages. The newspapers announced the landmark government study saying that children placed in day care are more likely to exhibit behavior problems than children reared at home. Friends at the playground traded tales about what a nanny cam caught on tape.

You enjoy your work-you need your work for many reasons-but all this "news" is making you wonder

if your career shouldn't take a backseat. Isn't it better for the kids if mom stays home? Isn't child care bad for children? Can anyone do as good a job as you? And don't forget what your sister said about that boy in your nephew's preschool class-the pint-sized bully who's getting kicked out-"His mom works full time, no wonder he's a problem."

Even when we feel good about the child care we've found for our kids, it's hard not to wonder about its long-term effects. You rarely hear the good news about child care, so wondering can quickly turn to worry.

### *The mother of all mothering studies*

In 2006, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (known as NICHD-an arm of the National Institutes of Health) wrapped up fifteen years of research on 1,364 kids. The conclusions were unambiguous: Kids with 100 percent maternal care fare no better than kids who spend time in child care. And "child care" in this study included all types of nonmaternal care, from center-based and family day-care settings to babysitters or nannies. As one summary put it, "There is no reason for mothers to feel like they are harming their children if they decide to work."

The study's key message: Child care is not the thing to worry about-how you parent is. In fact, kids in high-quality child care had higher cognitive and language skills than other kids-including those with at-home mothers. Children in high-quality child care also scored best on school readiness based on standardized tests of literacy and numbers skills (though, like all the effects of child care in the study, the effect was small relative to the effects of parents).

This is comforting to know if you're a working parent. But maybe you, like us, don't recall reading about this good news. That's because the media largely focused on one aspect of the study: For a small number of kids, long hours in child-care centers triggered "problem behavior," such as fighting or temper tantrums. Shouldn't parents worry about that? Not really, say the experts. The so-called "problems" weren't serious enough to warrant counseling. They were temporary, disappearing with age, usually between third and fifth grades, and could be reduced or avoided when these "problem" kids were placed in a different sort of child care, such as home-based care with fewer kids, and when their time in care was reduced. Don't fret like we did. When headline-seeking pundits claim child care will turn your kid into a bully, get the facts. You'll feel much better.

By 2006, the NICHD research network had collected millions of observations offering the richest data ever collected on any group of children. There has been a big time lag in getting these findings to parents-the NICHD published its first booklet for parents in 2005, covering only findings from the first four and a half years of the childrens' lives. To find out what happened to the kids after first grade, you have to dig into scientific journals-and talk to the researchers yourself-as we have done.

Here's the bottom line:

"Parents should focus on finding the best-quality child care they can and being the best parents they can," Kathleen McCartney, dean of Harvard's Graduate School of Education and NICHD investi-gator, told us. "There are some studies that show long hours in child care can pose a risk for behavior problems; it's a small effect, however, and children in child care do not show high levels of behavior problems that require professional intervention. If a child does show behavior problems, parents can do a lot on their own and in collaboration with teachers-for example, set appropriate limits, reward their children for good behavior, and correct bad behavior."

"The big news here is that the amount of time that mothers spent with their children does not seem to be that important; it is the quality of the interaction," said Aletha Huston, a University of Texas psychology professor, past president of the Society for Research in Child Development, and an NICHD investigator. "Many people don't have the luxury of deciding to stay home full time, but if you do, you should make the decision about using child care based on your own beliefs about the costs and benefits for you, your family, and your child as well as your judgment about the quality of the child care you can find. There is no credible evidence that being in child care as opposed to staying home full time with a parent is harmful to children. There is evidence that if you stay home full time when

you'd rather be working or if you work full time when you believe it's harmful to your child, your unhappiness may affect how well you relate to your child. If you follow your own beliefs, you'll probably be a better parent."

### *The NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development*

In 1987, top child development experts launched what would become "the most ambitious [study] ever undertaken of early child care and its consequences." Federal funding totaling \$126 million allowed the NICHD to design a study ten times larger and vastly more detailed than any prior research. According to Sarah Friedman, the study's scientific coordinator, child-care development experts spent two years agreeing on how to measure the effects of the many factors in children's lives.<sup>3</sup> The goal: to give parents scientifically based, authoritative answers (and end misleading headlines).

Researchers from leading universities competed to participate in the study and ten locations were chosen around the country. In 1991, researchers recruited 1,364 newborns and their parents—who had yet to make decisions about work and child care—from two dozen hospitals. These investigators studied the children in multiple environments including their homes, day care, and school. From birth to age fifteen, researchers tested these kids for cognitive skills, language, and behavior. Their parents, caregivers, and teachers were assessed for a variety of factors—most important, how they interacted with the children. Reflecting the ongoing challenges of child care in the United States, most kids in the study were in child care that did not meet the standards, such as minimum child/caregiver ratios, set by groups like the American Academy of Pediatrics or qualify as "high quality" according to the NICHD researchers.

Despite the lack of high-quality care, the outcomes for children who had been in childcare were reassuring. Yet, polls continue to say most parents still believe that staying home with Mom is better than even top-notch day care. Alison Clarke-Stewart, University of California psychologist and NICHD investigator, observes that "researchers need to communicate better about the positive effects of care on children's development and family well-being."

Until that happens, keep these FAQs handy.

1. Did kids in 100 percent maternal care score better on any measure than kids in child care? No.
2. Did child care harm child-mother attachment? Not unless the mother was insensitive to her child and the quality of care was low.
3. Did kids who started child care before twelve months have worse results? No.
4. Did kids have long-term behavior problems if they went to child care? No.

On average, children in child care showed a modest elevation in behavior problems that fell within the range of what is considered "normal." Problem behavior was concentrated in a small number of children, the level of misbehavior was pretty low, and the effect diminished between the third and sixth grades.

### *Why parenting will always trump child care*

Your child's time in the care of another person is short-lived; your role as a parent lasts forever. One major finding of the NICHD study is that how you behave as a parent influences your child's emotional, behavioral, and cognitive development four times more than any form of child care. In other words, stop worrying about leaving your child with someone else and focus on what happens when you (and your husband) get home.

There are some things you may not know that can help you get a lot more comfortable with being a working parent—they've certainly helped us. For example, working mothers and at-home mothers don't spend drastically different amounts of time interacting with their kids. Nonemployed moms do spend

far more hours in the house with their children. But it turns out that working moms spend only 20 percent less time than their at-home peers in "social interaction" with kids-playing games or reading books versus making dinner while the kids run around outside.

Looking at time diaries of over one thousand mothers from the NICHD pool, a University of Texas study found the following: On weekdays, nonemployed mothers spent two and a half hours per day interacting with their kids while working mothers spent one hour less. On the weekends employed mothers do some catch-up, spending three hours per day interacting with their kids (versus two hours for nonemployed moms, who are getting some well-deserved downtime). So, the working moms in the study had 80 percent as many hours of interaction with their kids as nonemployed mothers.

How do kids see this? In a large study conducted in 1994, the Families and Work Institute surveyed children of both employed and nonemployed moms and found their responses remarkably similar. Whether mothers worked or not, children were equally likely to say they got enough time with Mom (about two-thirds said this). But while the majority of the kids felt they got enough time with Mom (whether or not she worked), 40 percent said they had too little time with their other parent: Dad. More on that later.

Happy working mothers tell us that their jobs, in fact, help them to be better parents. In our "Real Lives of Working Mothers" survey, one woman offered this observation: "Before I had children, a coworker told me she was a better mother because she works. She said she appreciated her time with her daughter more because she didn't do it all the time. I was skeptical then, but now, with two sons of my own, I fervently agree with her assessment." Or as another working mom said: "I think there's a zone. There's a minimum amount of time your child needs with you but there's also an upper limit-where you stop being the parent you want to be, when you've had it with fussing and spilt milk. My mother said she loved staying home but I recall an awful lot of shouting. Knowing there's a clean office for me at work, I can laugh about the sticky handprints in our kitchen."

It turns out that parent education is another thing that raises a mother's sensitivity-and child care can give you a leg up. Research shows we can learn important skills-like setting boundaries and giving options-by watching and talking to well-trained child care workers.

Time Out! If you sense that kids today get more time with their parents than you ever did-even if your mom never worked-you are probably right. At the University of Maryland, sociologist Suzanne Bianchi has tracked the changes in how married couples spend their time. This is what she found:

Percentage of children with breadwinner dad/homemaker mom:

1965: 60 percent

2000: 30 percent

Percentage of mothers who work:

1965: 33 percent

2000: 71 percent

Hours per week that moms spend on kids:

1965: 10.6

2000: 12.9

Hours per week that dads spend on kids:

1965: 2.6

2000: 6.5

What suffered? The number of hours spent on housework was down about one-third.<sup>10</sup> So, embrace your unmade bed as a sign you're prioritizing your kids.

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