

Conducting Community Assessments

Project Maine Families Cumberland County Initiative

Authors

Jane Hubley, Project Maine Families

Wendy Betts-Bessey

National Child Welfare Resource Center for Management and Administration

Design

Anne Bernard

National Child Welfare Resource Center for Management and Administration

1994

Project Maine Families

A joint project of the Cumberland County Child Abuse and Neglect Council, Franklin County Children's Task Force and the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Management and Administration

Additional Information: Project Maine Families

Lucky Hollander, Director
Cumberland County Child Abuse and Neglect Council
P.O. Box 912
Portland, ME 04104
207-874-1120

Tony Scucci, Director
Franklin County Children's Task Force
32 Maine Street
Farmington, ME 04938
207-778-6960

Helaine Hornby, Director
National Child Welfare Resource Center for Management and Administration
University of Southern Maine
96 Falmouth Street
Portland, ME 04103
207-780-4430

Additional Copies

Clearinghouse
National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement
University of Southern Maine
PO Box 05010
Portland, ME 04112
207-780-5810 or 1-800-HELP KID

Support for this project is provided by the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Grant No. 90-CA-1424.

Contents

Introduction	1
Topics:	
Teen Parents	5
First Time Parents	11
Working Parents	15
Conclusion	21
Appendix A. Programs that Serve Parents in Cumberland County	23
Appendix B. Project Maine Families Programs	25
Bibliography	39

Introduction

This report describes how communities in one Maine county learned more about the needs and concerns of families, and how they organized activities aimed at responding effectively, efficiently and compassionately to support families.

During the first phase of the Project Maine Families needs assessment, representatives from all sectors of the community were interviewed about their perceptions of the needs of families and children. (See *A Planning Journey: Roadmap for Conducting Community Assessments*, 1994.) It became clear through these interviews that the respondents believed all families can and do experience the stresses that put them at risk for child abuse and neglect and that a comprehensive child abuse and neglect response would have to address all families.

In response to this information and in an effort to learn more to develop the project's goals, a series of focus groups were conducted with parents living in our community. We chose three specific groups: adolescent parents, first time parents, and working parents.

Community Assessment Questions

1. Does your agency currently offer programs which assist families and/or address family problems? If yes, what are they?
 - a. Are any of these programs set up specifically to address child abuse and neglect prevention? Which one? How?
 - b. Do any other programs not designed to address child abuse indirectly impact on the problem? How?
 - c. Did your agency ever offer any child abuse prevention programs? What were they? Why were they discontinued?
2. What do you see as the major problems and concerns facing the children and parents among your clients?
3. What kinds of programs or services do you think are needed to address these concerns?

These groups have traditionally experienced many of the risk factors common to child abuse and neglect. In fact, many programs continue to design services for these vulnerable populations. The current body of professional literature helped us target these groups with the hope that they would help us find out more about how to design responsive services. (Marks, et al., 1989)

Project Maine Families recruited parents for our focus groups through several methods: a newspaper ad through direct mailings to day care centers, businesses, pediatricians, teen clinics, social service agencies, and libraries; and, through word of mouth. Each focus group was held in a local church. An experienced facilitator conducted a total of ten groups: four groups of working parents; three groups of first time parents; and three groups of teen parents, with each group varying in the number of participants from four to fifteen. Each participant was paid \$20 to attend and provided food, transportation and child care. A project staff person recorded verbatim notes of the discussion. Each group lasted for approximately two hours and the same questions were asked each time. (For more information on focus groups, their value, and the logistics see *Focus Groups: An Effective Marketing Research Tool for Social Service Agencies*, 1992.)

After analyzing the data from these focus groups PMF saw that regardless of age or experience level many parents held the same concerns.

Risk Factors for Child Abuse and Neglect

Parent Factors

- History of abuse as a child
- Low self-image, aggression-impulsiveness (abuse) and depression (neglect)
- Abuse of alcohol or drugs
- Teenage parenthood
- Unemployment
- Criminal record

Parent/Child Factors

- Presence of non-biological parent or paramour
- Persistent conflict in family (e.g., marital conflict, spouse abuse)
- Poor knowledge of child development and parenting; setting unrealistic expectations for the child
- Low family income or poverty

Child Factors

- Child born prematurely or with low birth weight
- Child seen as "different" by parents (for no apparent reason or due to physical or mental handicapping condition)
- Age

Community Factors

- Social isolation of family
- Economically depressed area
- Widespread acceptance of corporal punishment
- Society's reluctance to intervene in parent-child relationships

All parents felt alone, isolated and inadequate. All parents worried about the quality, cost and availability of child care. All parents wanted their communities to offer more free, family activities. And, all parents felt parenting was an increasingly undervalued activity in our society. Many statements made by teen parents were also made by older, working parents. Many fears expressed by first time parents were also expressed by experienced parents. Rich or poor, young or old, experienced or beginners, parents felt an enormous responsibility in the development of their children.

Although the group's concerns were most often similar, it was clear that part of Project Maine Families' strategic response would have to be tailored to specific groups. For example, while all parents reported feeling isolated and alone, teen parents' isolation was doubly difficult because of the importance of peer group contact in adolescence. Working parents unanimously agreed parenting was undervalued, but reported it was in their work place they felt it most keenly.

Questions for the Focus Groups

In the Maine focus group project, one staff member who had prior experience with focus groups drew up a preliminary list of questions. Everyone on the team reviewed the list and made recommendations for revisions to this first draft. It was a back-and-forth process.

1. When you were growing up, what do you think were the hardest things about being a parent? What kinds of problems and needs did parents have then? Where could people turn to for help, if they needed to do that? How did these problems get solved, if they did?
2. Now let's consider being a parent today in _____ County, Maine. Is it harder or easier raising kids here than it used to be? What kinds of problems do you think parents have now, particularly parents in your circumstances (i.e., of newborns, teen parents, working parent families, etc.)? How do people handle problems like that today? Is that the best way(s) to solve the problems parents have?
3. I'd like to find out more about this community. Suppose a friend of yours wanted to ask someone for advice about how to handle a problem with one of their children. Let's say that the problem was that they just couldn't get their child to stop talking back to them, and wanted some tips on what they might do about that. Who would you suggest they talk to? Where could they go?
4. What's missing that parents need or could use in raising families? What gets in the way of making these things available, in your opinion? If such things were available, would you use them yourself? Do you know other parents who would?
5. When you think about what parents need in this community, where do you believe these things should come from? What kinds of people and organizations should provide them? What are the reasons they ought to take the lead? How would you organize something like that? Where would you start? Who needs to be involved?

The following sections outline the information we obtained from the different focus groups as well as other information about parents in Cumberland County and Maine.

Topic: Teen Parents

Project Maine Families (PMF) conducted three teen parent focus groups for a total of twelve parents who participated. Because teen parents did not respond to our normal recruitment procedure, newspaper ads, fliers and posters, we used a slightly different strategy. PMF called social service agencies asking them to recruit directly from their current or past client list. Whenever any teen mother called in with an interest in participating, we asked her to bring any friends and acquaintances to participate as well. (After the first focus group with teens, PMF asked the participants to help recruit others which was our most successful strategy.) The teen mothers told us that their initial reluctance to participate was due in part to suspicion of our motives, their embarrassment about their parenting, and their general distrust of social service agencies. Fortunately, once the group was assembled and the questions asked, the discussion was lively, provocative and informing.

Of the twelve women who participated, many lived alone with their child, a few lived with their parents, the parents of the baby's father, or foster parents. Fewer still lived with the baby's father or another male partner. Most had no outside employment; the few who worked were employed by fast food restaurants and worked irregular and unpredictable shifts. Some received Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Others were dependent on their partner's salaries, or parental support. All but one participant had one child. Most grew up in Maine and had some extended family in the state. Many came from abusive and neglectful families and limited their contact with them to protect themselves and their child. No one was currently enrolled in high school and many had dropped out before their pregnancy. A few were earning GEDs and two had a diploma. The group as a whole was reflective of the majority of teen parents in Cumberland County.

Facts About Teen Parents

- 8.6% of all births in Cumberland County in 1990 were to teen mothers.
- Most teen parents have only one child. Less than 20% of teens have two or more children.

Source: Maine Vital Statistics, 1990

In the focus groups adolescent parents reported being overwhelmed and unsupported in their attempts to define themselves as parents.

I think the hardest thing about being a parent is frustration. You do the same thing day in and day out. There is no one there to tell you that you are doing a good job because the kids are too young to tell.

I think that every mom feels like she's not doing enough, not doing it right. I love to talk to other mothers so you can see that you are not the only one who feels like that. Parents' meetings and support groups help. You have to like yourself to be a good parent. At one point I felt like I was going crazy.

It was great being a parent for a while, but then you start to miss the sleep, the freedom, etc. Sometimes you just need a break — every parent does.

My baby is colicky and cries all the time. I have no friends and can't attend school.

Facts About Teen Parents

- Nearly 80% of all teen parents in Cumberland County were not married at the time of their child's birth.

Source: Maine Vital Statistics, 1990

- Many pregnant and parenting teens drop out of high school. This means they are more likely to be unemployed. Less than half of the teens in Maine without a high school diploma are employed compared with 75% of employed teens who have a high school diploma.

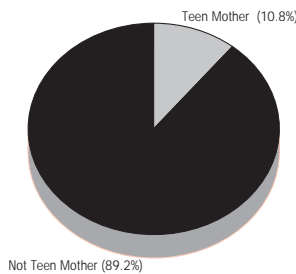
Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990

Most teen parents are single, do not have a high school diploma and do not have a job.

Figure 1

Births to Teens in Maine

Total Number of Births = 17,314

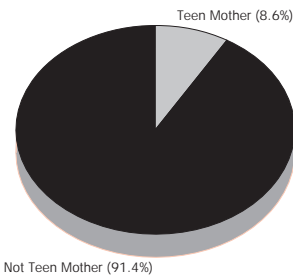


Source: Maine Vital Statistics, 1990

Figure 2

Births to Teens in Cumberland County

Total Number of Births in Cumberland County = 3,515



Source: Maine Vital Statistics, 1990

They described being without work and without necessities, like diapers, Tylenol, telephones, and food.

I'm trying to find a job right now but it's not easy. Finding transportation to the job and finding good hours is not easy.

The parents described delaying payment of electricity and telephone bills to pay the weekly expense of laundry. When their phone bills became too high, their service was terminated. Being without a phone cut off contact with others and added dramatically to their isolation. Another problem for these young parents concerned their health insurance: with a Medicaid card, they were unable to get even the most common over-the-counter medication like Tylenol, so when their infant or toddler ran a fever, they could not treat it but rather had to go through a long involved and stressful process just to obtain basic needs. One mother described a situation where she had to wake a neighbor, use his telephone and call an ambulance to get to the emergency room where, after a long wait, a nurse gave the child Tylenol and told them to go home. Once dismissed by the hospital staff they had to find their own transportation home, by getting a ride from a friend, using one of the hospital's scarce taxi vouchers or walking. (An ambulance or police car might take them to the hospital, but would not return them home.)

Limited Resources for Teen Parents

- A single parent with one child who qualifies for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) can receive a maximum monthly payment of \$337 (1993).
- The number of teen parents on AFDC in Maine is increasing. In 1989, 5.2% of cases were to teen parents compared to 6.5% in 1991.
- The monthly allowance of food stamps for a single parent with one child is \$142. That's only \$67 for mother and child every month for food. A family of two could easily spend that much in one week on groceries!
- The average amount a woman in Cumberland County receives per month on WIC (Women Infants and Children Program) for herself is \$30. For an infant, the mother can get an average of \$65 per month. For children one year and older that amount drops to \$31 per month. WIC provides only for limited needs. Milk, cheese, cereal, juice, peanut butter and eggs are items that can be purchased with WIC. Women who breast feed can get a few other items such as canned tuna, carrots and beans.

Source: Maine Department of Human Services, 1993

Imagine being unemployed and trying to raise a child each month on AFDC, Food Stamps and WIC. You would never have enough money for even the basics.

The participants reported feeling judged by the world and not respected because of their age.

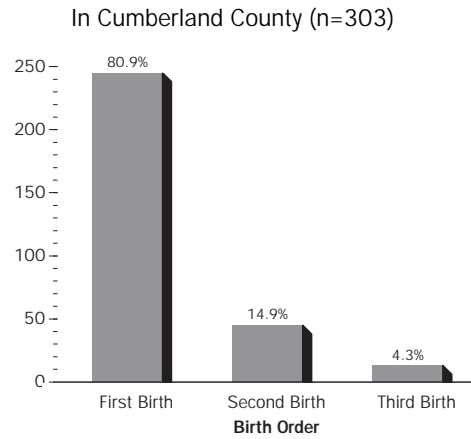
Society makes me mad. They look at me like I'm a weirdo because I'm young and have a kid. They think that I don't know anything. They look at me and see a "teenage mother" and so they don't take me seriously. Even when I bring my daughter into the doctor's and tell them that she has an ear infection, they think that I don't know what I'm talking about. But she's my daughter and I know when something is wrong.

Mothers reported going to school and being tired, because they'd be up all night. They reported having teachers penalize them for late assignments, or feeling badly that they'd have to leave the baby with someone they didn't know well or trust so they wouldn't miss a class.

Like other parents these mothers described the stresses on their lives and their need for occasional breaks. They wished for a good safe place to bring their child so that they might get some respite, work, attend to their housing needs, catch-up on sleep, have fun or do laundry.

The most consistent message from these young women was that they

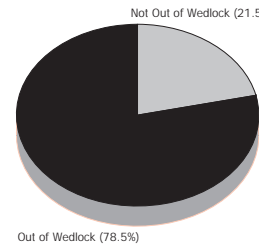
Figure 3
Birth Order of Children Born to Teens



Source: Maine Vital Statistics, 1990

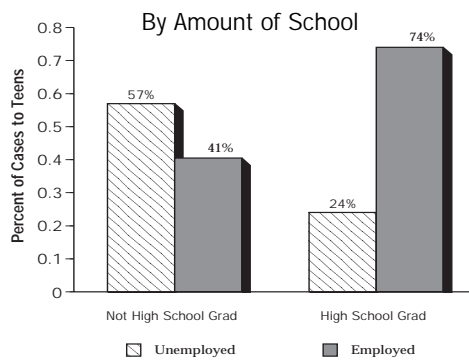
Figure 4
Out of Wedlock Births for Teens

Total Number of Births (Cumberland County) = 303



Source: Maine Vital Statistics, 1990

Figure 5
Employment Status of Teens in Maine



Source: U.S. Bureau of Census, 1990

wanted to be good parents; to be better to their child than their own parents had been to them. While they may not have grown up in supportive environments, they did not want the same thing to happen to their own children.

My son is someone I can count on. I know that he will always love me.

I was happy when I found out that I was pregnant. She (my daughter) relies on me for everything and I know that she is always going to love me. It is like a “guaranteed love.” She makes me feel important. I don’t want my daughter to feel the way I did.

While the community does respond to some of these needs with housing subsidies, teen health clinics, a comprehensive teen parent program at the YWCA, day care vouchers, and foster grandparents, many teens do not use these services because provider agencies often require strict compliance with rules and regulations and offer few choices (see **Appendix A** for a list of programs that serve parents in Cumberland County). The agencies are often hard to get to with children or require long waiting periods which is difficult with young children. These community programs have good intentions but do not always have the tremendous flexibility and patience these young and often chaotic families need.

Project Maine Families Responds

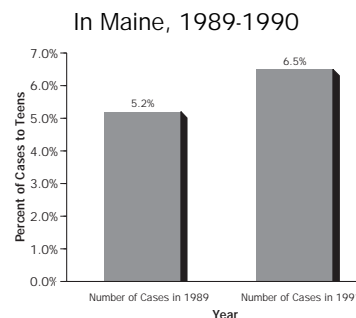
Based on the information from teen parents and other sources, Project Maine Families has tried to meet some of the needs of teen parents with two specific programs: **Deering Family Day Care** and **Project SOAP**.

The **Deering Family Day Care Program** provides teen parents with free child care while the parent is in school. Teen parents can also take part in a specialized course designed to help them as they try to parent and finish school.

Project SOAP provides teen mothers with the opportunity to do their laundry free of charge once a week with a group of other teen mothers. It also provides lunch, child care and activities, free of charge, each week. Another benefit is the informal support found in sharing information and talking with other teen mothers.

For a more in-depth review of each of these programs, please see **Appendix B**

Figure 6
AFDC Cases to Teen Parents



Source: Maine Department of Human Services, 1992.

First Time Parents

Project Maine Families conducted three focus groups with a total of 19 first time parents. There were seventeen women and two men in the groups. Our recruitment for first time parents was similar to the other two groups; a newspaper ad, fliers sent to day care centers and family day care homes, and posted notices at pediatrician offices, local hospital clinics and libraries.

The first time parents in our groups came from all areas of Cumberland County. They represented single parents, married couples, young parents, older parents, parents who planned pregnancies and parents who did not. The educational and economic levels represented in our groups were reflective of the county as a whole.

A new baby can change a person's life, and the life of a family. But, for first time parents a baby means a new identity; they are now parents — a job they will have as long as they live. In addition to bringing joy and happiness babies can also bring sleepless nights, challenging behavior, and constant demands. As new parents adjust to their new roles as mother or father, other relationships have to adjust as well. Marriages can be affected, as well as one's relationships with one's own parents, which creates additional stresses for the already overwhelmed new parent. Today, in many cases, there are even more stresses, as families deal with financial crises, housing, employment demands, and child care.

Facts About First Time Parents

- Nearly half of all births (44%) in Cumberland County in 1990 were to first time parents.

Source: Maine Vital Statistics, 1990.

- Many studies have shown that early intervention services, such as health, education and social services, provided to families help to reduce the risk and incidence of child abuse and neglect.

Source: The Hawaii Healthy Start Program, 1991; Bavolek and Dellinger-Bavolek, 1986; Barth, Hacking and Ash, 1988.

- One-fourth of all first births (26%) in Cumberland County in 1990 were to unmarried women, half of whom were teenagers.

New parents told us of feeling isolated, inadequate, unprepared and alone as they faced the difficult job of parenting.

I felt like everything was a surprise, just one surprise after another. I didn't realize how unprepared we were emotionally. I felt very isolated, had to do everything on my own. There was not time as a grown-up. The joys of parenthood were fleeting.

When I was home with him (the baby) I felt more overwhelmed. It was just him and me. I have no family around here. I was the primary caretaker 24 hours a day. I went back to work to get my identity. I enjoy him much more now. I value our time together much more now.

I don't think you can ever be prepared for parenting. I worked in a day care for a year, it's totally different.

I don't understand as much about my son as I thought I would naturally (being his) mother.

There's very little consideration of the emotional impact of children, of having a young child at home.

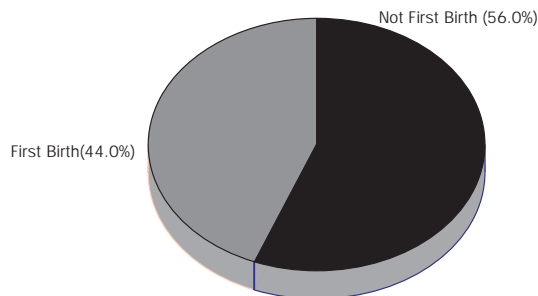
Financial difficulties can compound the stress of new parents because they may take time off from work or leave work entirely. Also, new baby brings additional expenses to families budget, he or she needs clothing, health care, food, and childcare.

Financially it's hard being a parent today with day care expenses, rent expenses.

Money limits your options as a parent.

Compared to what people are making, costs are higher today.

Figure 7
Births in Cumberland County
Total Number of Births in 1990 = 3515



Source: Maine Vital Statistics, 1990

Support is important for all parents but for new parents it is critical. Support from someone in the home, a spouse or partner, or a neighbor, or someone to call on the telephone can make a big difference in helping a new parent feel better about his or her situation.

*Parents need support, need to know they are okay and functioning.
Families used to function supportively.*

None of my close friends have children. It would have been really nice to be able to pick up the phone and call (friends) especially during that tough time.

I called my sister and said what do you do when they're awake? She said let him watch you wash dishes. I wasn't used to this little person.

First time parents are vulnerable as they experience these life changes. There is often not much preparation for this new and difficult job. They face many new experiences, some wonderful and others more stressful. All new parents struggle to develop a family with this new person in their life. Nothing ever seems to be the same again. They have been irrevocably changed.

There are many services in our community directed at helping first time parents. Parents are able to receive maternal and child health care services, parent education, child care, job training and support. However, it is clear there is much more to do. A significant amount of research has shown that educational and support services to new parents results in reduced incidence of child abuse and neglect (Hunter and Kilstrom, 1979; Crnic, et al., 1983). Communities are beginning to recognize and support families as they live, work and play, by offering opportunities for parents to feel supported, encouraged and welcomed in all sectors of their community.

Project Maine Families Responds

Many of the programs that serve working parents are also relevant to first time parents. Specifically, **School/Family Community Events** and **Parents Recess**.

In **School/Family Community Events**, first time parents have the opportunity to help design and participate in a community-focused event where they can meet others who live in the same area. It is in this setting that friendships can begin.

Usually, first time parents have little or no knowledge of local schools because they do not yet have children in the school system. When community events are held on school grounds, it gives first time parents the opportunity to become familiar with school grounds and personnel. This helps to minimize some of the stress for parents and children that is associated with bringing a child to school for the first time. The school environment becomes a comfortable setting that is associated with fun activities.

Planning and participating in community events also gives the opportunity to socialize and meet new people in the community or to connect with old friends. Isolation is decreased when people get out and join the community.

Parents Recess is another Project Maine Families initiative that involves first time parents. Information received, especially by rural parents, revealed a sense of isolation and loneliness experienced as a result of the geographical isolation coupled with being new parents with children too young to be in the school system.

Parents Recess is a place for parents to connect both formally and informally. Guest speakers present programs on a variety of topics ranging from the fun to the serious. Gardening, self-esteem and child development are just a few topics that have been presented. Informally, parents can share conversation and refreshments together where information about childrearing is exchanged and new friendships formed.

For a more in-depth review of each of these programs, please see Appendix B.

Topic: Working Parents

Project Maine Families conducted four focus groups with working parents from Cumberland County Maine. A total of 30 parents participated. The participants came from all areas of Cumberland County and represented both two income families and single income families. There were both men and women in the groups, as well as single and non single parents. The educational level of the participants ranged from those with no high school diploma, to people with graduate degrees. There were people who worked shift work and people who held white collar jobs. In all groups there were parents of small children as well as parents of older children. There were parents who had only one child and parents who had up to five children. The group as a whole reflected the type of families living and working in Cumberland County today.

Working parents in our focus groups described their lives as a precarious house of cards where they delicately balanced their work responsibilities and family obligations. Parents reported that any change could disrupt their balancing act, for

Facts About Working Parents

- The traditional father-at-work-mother-at-home-with-the-children family is not very traditional anymore; less than 20% of all families nationwide are of this type.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991.

- Studies have shown that conflicting home and work responsibilities can result in a variety of complications for working parents—greater stress, depression, absenteeism, increased use of sick time, decreased productivity and decreased life satisfaction.

Source: Googins and Burden, 1987; Zedeck and Mosier, 1990.

- Of all the children in Cumberland County who live with two parents, nearly all of the families have at least one parent who works outside the home.
- In many two-parent families both parents must work. In other families only the father works outside the home (29%) or only the mother works outside the home (2%). Children who live with two parents are more likely to be better-off financially.
- Single parent homes have a tougher time financially. For children who live with their mother only, 70% of the moms work outside the home. For children who live with their father only, 90% of the dads work outside the home.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990.

example, a new job, a new baby, a major illness, loss of transportation, or changes in day care. These situations, or just the fear of these potential problems, proved overwhelming for many working parents. Other parents reported the changes did not have to be so major for their lives to become stressful. If their child's school started late, or they had an emergency dental appointment or the traffic got tied-up on the way home from work their day's delicate balance and often their entire week's balance was affected.

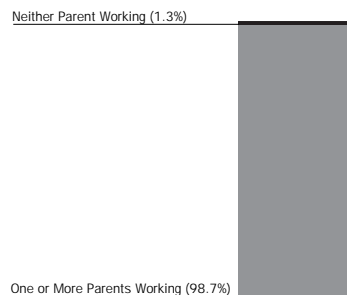
There is less time to spend with your children today. We have to set aside "special time" on the weekend to spend time together and do whatever the kids want to do.

The time issue is a big thing. When I get home from work I'm tired and sometimes I just don't feel like playing Hungry Hippo. It takes so much time and energy. My husband's attitude is that he wants to spend intensive time with our daughter but sometimes I just don't have the energy.

Among the difficulties many parents mentioned was the lack of adequate day care. They reported that child care was frequently too expensive, not what they wanted or their children did not fit the requirements to qualify for care. Parents resorted to leaving their older children home alone for several hours from the time the child left school, until the time the parents arrived home from work. "It's not fair for a nine-year-old to have to be alone after school." But for many parents there is no good alternative.

My son is in middle school and is alone everyday from 1:30 p. when he gets home from school until 5:30 when I get home from work. Once I get home we argue about homework until he goes to bed. I feel guilty I have to work, so I can't be home with him or taking him to activities. I wish we didn't argue during the only time I see him each day. It makes me sad that what I have to choose for us (employment with benefits) causes so much pain day to day.

Figure 8
Employment of Parents Outside the Home
Kids Living with Both Parents in Cumberland County



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990

Other complications arise when a child is sick because many child care establishments will not accept a child when ill. Parents many times would rather have the child stay at home when sick, but again felt they could not take time off to care for their sick child without being penalized at work.

There's no day care for sick children. Our day care won't take a sick child. Care for a sick child is very expensive.

When the kids are sick the family comes first, why have an unhappy employee?

A parent has to take the day off—I lose pay for a day when my child is sick.

I need my vacation time for my sanity so I don't like to use that time when my kids are sick. But I can't take sick time and still get a raise.

Parents talked about how hard it was to juggle the multiple responsibilities of work and family. They acknowledged the need to work and wished that the work place was more sensitive to family issues.

For example, one parent who had three children returned to work six weeks after giving birth. She needed to return to work before she wanted to because her family's only health benefits came from her employment. She wanted to continue breast feeding her infant so she used her break and lunch time to pump breast milk. Her supervisor would often stand by the bathroom door telling her to hurry up, that break time was almost over. After several weeks of this increased stress she stopped breast feeding her infant.

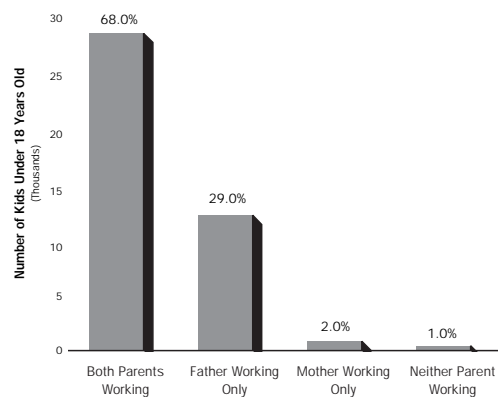
The company should acknowledge the fact that half the employees are women.

The employer's attitude is to let another company deal with you and your family.

The bottom line — an awareness that parenting affects employees.

Are companies run by parents?

Figure 9
Employment of Parents Outside the Home
Kids Living with Both Parents in Cumberland County



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990

Working parents have special problems and issues that related to their economic, career and family situations. They also experience the more general doubts and frustrations of all parents. One of the most common concerns expressed by parents was whether they were being a “good parent” and where they could get help .

I think that living with guilt is one of the hardest things. Guilt because you didn't do something or that you didn't do something. You try to be perfect but you are doing it all by the seat of your pants.

There are no services for the average parent.

There are no role models.

I was prepared for the physical care — I was not prepared for the emotional care of my child.

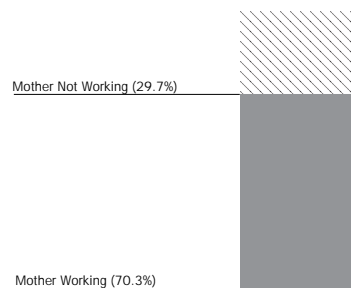
You feed them healthy food and wash their faces. But when they come home after a fight or no one will play with them or someone calls them a name you're not so well prepared.

It's a whole life job.

There are times when I know I'm not the best parent I could be, but there's nobody out there to step in. There's nobody else for my daughter. I miss that for her.

Research has shown that conflicting home and work responsibilities can result in a number of complications for the working parent: greater strain, depression, absenteeism, increased sick time, decreased productivity and decreased life satisfactions (Googins and Burden, 1987, Zedeck and Mosier, 1990 and Fernandez 1986). Not surprisingly, women experience these strains more than men and single parentS more than married parents. The workplace is encountering increased pressure to meet the needs of its parenting employees to maintain a productive and healthy place to work.

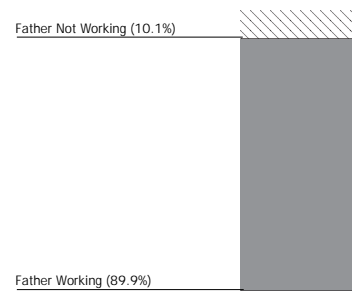
Figure 10
Employment of Mother Outside the Home
Kids Living with Mother Only in Cumberland County



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990

Parents who work, either because they want to or they need to, have many concerns. A family's survival may often depend on the income. Workplaces must begin to look at their employees as members of families, and create places where the challenges faced by those individuals are acknowledged. The traditional support of the extended family and neighborhood environment have all but disappeared, leaving the workplace as the primary arena in which a great percentage people can get the support they need to raise families.

Figure 11
Employment of Father Outside the Home
Kids Living with Father Only in Cumberland County



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990

Project Maine Family Responds

Programs that support working families can focus on a variety of needs. Project Maine Families has helped to establish two programs in particular that help support working parents, although they are not limited only to parents who work.

School/Family Community Events offer opportunities for families to spend quality time together at a community organized and operated event. Project Maine Families has worked with several communities in the Cumberland County area (see *Community Events*, 1994) to help establish groups comprised of school, business, and civic organizations in conjunction with citizens, such as parents, senior citizens and teens, to design and implement community events. The focus of events varies in each community but maintains an atmosphere that promotes family and community support and togetherness.

Activities are family-friendly. All age groups can attend, food is served and everything is free. Activities are held at times when families can easily attend. Communities learn how to support families and how to minimize barriers to participation in the events. The benefits are twofold: the community learns more about supporting families; and families and the entire community have a chance to have fun and socialize.

The **Jack Family Center** is a parent center located in the Jack Elementary School in Portland, Maine. The Center provides a space and opportunity for parents to share common concerns and questions, to obtain information on children, parenting and school policy, to get peer support and to develop a partnership with the school and community in which they live.

For a more in-depth review of each of these programs, please see Appendix B. Project Maine Families also provides assistance to community organizations and businesses who are interested in developing and supporting family-friendly endeavors.

Conclusion

Project Maine Families will continue to work with the community to provide more comprehensive services to parents. For working parents a mobile working parent resource center is being developed that will travel throughout the county offering parent information and education material, including child care information. We are working with the business community, public libraries and other social service agencies to coordinate programs that work to both identify and meet the specific needs of working parents.

For first time parents we will support all efforts to establish a “healthy start” program in our county insuring each family a home visitor at the birth of their child. This model is successful in other parts of the country and provides the type of initial services and information most first time parents need and want. We will also continue our work with libraries, day care centers and other community agencies identifying and meeting the needs of first time parents.

For teen parents in our county we will advocate for their specific needs as they attend school, attempt employment or job training. It is clear that this population has very specific and adverse needs and requires special advocating in the community. Before we implement additional services it is most important that we clarify for the community just what this population needs and will accept from the community.

The community has a vital role to play in the lives of families. It is critical that all sectors of our community begin to listen, understand and support families as they live, work and play. If children grow up in a community that responds kindly and compassionately, they will learn to be kind, compassionate adults. The community can demonstrate its support in many ways:

- with workplaces that are supportive;
- with recreational facilities that recognize and support families;
- by respecting and compensating day care providers; and
- by insisting that schools understand that families have complicated and diverse needs.

Programs that Serve Parents in Cumberland County

There are many ways to help parents and many are happening in Cumberland County. Day care services, social and medical services, job training and support are just a few. Here are some of the programs that help parents get ahead.

Day Care

Child Care Connections
Catholic Charities of Maine

Housing

Cumberland County Affordable Housing
YMCA
YWCA
York-Cumberland Housing Development Corporation
Fair Harbor Emergency Shelter

Job Training

Work Opportunities Unlimited
Goodwill of Maine, Inc. — vocational training

Health Services

Pregnancy Information Hotline
LaLeche League
Pre-natal Care
Planned Parenthood
The AIDS Project
Ingraham Volunteers
Day One

Center for Community Dental Health
PROP — People's Regional Opportunity
Program
Community Alcoholism Services
Community Health Services
Community Resource Center

Social Services

Parent Training
Parents Anonymous of Maine
Parent Support Groups
YWCA Teen Parent Program
Young Fathers
PROP
Lutheran Child and Family Services of
Maine
Munjoy Hill Neighborhood Association

Project for Supported Living
Wayside Evening Soup Kitchen
YWCA Street Program
Youth Alternatives of Southern Maine
The Maine Women's Fund
Women in Nurturing Support Group
Teen Adventure Program
Project Maine Families
Community Counseling Center
United Way of Maine

If you would like more information on any of these program, please call Project
Maine Families at 207-874-1120.

Deering Family Day Care Program

Overview

The Deering Family Day Care Program provides teen parents with free childcare while the parent is in school. Teen parents can also take part in a specialized curriculum designed to help them as they try to parent and finish school.

History

The Deering Project began as a result of Project Maine Families' focus groups with teen parents. Teen parents told us that they wanted to be in school but could not afford childcare, or maintain the traditional school schedule. It began in 1992 with three licensed day care homes and three teen mothers.

Community

Deering is one of two high schools in Portland, the biggest city in Cumberland County. It has approximately 900 students. In 1989 in Cumberland County there were 299 births to adolescents each woman under the age of 20. In 1992 there were 13 teen mothers enrolled at Deering High School. In September 1992 there were 5 pregnant teenagers known to the school and 4 teen mothers currently attending.

Program Components and Services

- Free childcare
- Flexible schedule for teen parents
- Potential credit for teen parents if he/she works with the day care home in a supervised approved way.
- In-school support group with other teen parents

- Parenting class for credit
- Support for day care provider

Participants

Participants are students attending Deering High School who are parents.

Staff

There are three licensed day care providers. The school nurse and social worker facilitate the support group and make referrals. The home economics teacher is the principal contact for the teen parents and the parenting class instructor. Project Maine Families provides ongoing support to teen mothers, school staff, and day care providers.

Outreach

The school nurse, social worker and home economics teacher meet with pregnant and parenting teenagers to inform them of the project and its opportunities.

Evaluation

Questionnaires are developed to be administered before and after a student participates. In-person exit interviews with participants are conducted by Project Maine Families staff.

Funding

The first year of funding was provided by Project Maine Families. In the second year, a local social service agency, (DHRS) providing family day care services received a grant to fund the three slots. The school provides all the overhead costs.

Highlights

The school administration and staff responded to the program by initiating curriculum changes which directly benefit teen parent students. Students have more flexible schedules enabling them to take their children to day care and not miss important class time. The community sees the needs of these parents and is willing to begin to address them. A work group made up of interested community people dedicated themselves to this population and their children.

Suggestions

Find a responsive school person. Meet with teen parents and find out what they need to stay in school. Explore other community agencies to see what they can provide teen parents. Build in a means of “on the spot” feedback, both verbal and written. Create a work group of community people with diverse and varied interests to “oversee and critique” the project’s development.

Parents Recess

Overview

Parents Recess is a place for parents to connect both formally and informally. Formally, parents enjoy listening to and learning about a variety of topics. Speakers from the community come and present programs on both fun and serious topics. Presentations range from gardening and cooking to self-esteem (for parents and children) and early childhood education. Handouts are frequently distributed and copies are saved in case anyone misses a meeting. Most of the speakers come from the local area which allows participants contact with the rich and varied resources in their neighborhood.

More informally, parents talk about their lives and children. They share stories, advice, and the ups and downs of being parents. They find support in one another and make new friends. Another important part of the program involves sharing in group tasks such as set-up and clean-up. A sign up sheet is passed around and members take turns bringing in home baked items to eat during the meetings. Those who can, donate \$1.00 per session toward coffee and tea, and the children’s snacks.

History

In response to a community assessment about the needs and concerns of families in Cumberland County, Project Maine Families conducted focus groups with local parents. In these focus groups parents from diverse family backgrounds and many different geographic areas shared their concerns and ideas about what kinds of things would help address their needs and reduce the stresses in their lives that negatively affected their children. It was clear that all parents felt alone, isolated and inadequate to parent, all parents worried about the quality, cost and availability of day care, all parents wanted their communities to offer more free family activities and all parents felt parenting was an undervalued job.

There were, however, specific areas of concern expressed by parents with small children living in the more rural part of the county. Parents in these areas felt increased isolation to the physical distance between them, their neighbors and the town center. For many parents it wasn't until their children entered school at age five that they first meet other parents with similar concerns.

In Steep Falls, a rural section of the town of Standish, 30 miles from Portland, a group of parents met with Project Maine Families staff to consider ways the project might be able to reduce this isolation and begin to reach out to parents whose children were not yet in school. At the same time in Standish, a local church (the Standish Congregational Church) was looking for opportunities to work with families. A parent from the first group contacted a member of the Church to explore the potential for meeting the needs of families in the Steep Falls/Standish area. This informal contact grew into the formal collaboration which became *Parents Recess*.

The original planners of this parent support program were careful in choosing its name. They knew parents wanted time for themselves without having to attend "parenting class." They wanted to create a time for parents to relax, get a break from their responsibilities and focus on themselves, not unlike the recess children have at school. They decided to call the program *Parents Recess*, and invited any parent, male or female, with children of any age to join. They advertised the program through fliers, notices sent home through the elementary schools, announcements on local TV and posted notices at central locations.

Program Components

- Parent selected programming
- Free childcare
- Informal support and networking

Participants

Any parent living in Cumberland County, although most participants are women with small children, living in rural Cumberland County.

Outreach

Fliers announcing programs are sent home with school children in several districts. They are also posted throughout the community. Notices are sent also to churches, businesses, pediatricians and local newspapers. Word of mouth is a large part of our outreach.

Evaluation

An ongoing program evaluation is being conducted, however a questionnaire is regularly used to survey participants about what they'd like at future meetings.

Funding

Funding for childcare comes directly from Project Maine Families and costs less than \$1,000 per year. Speakers donate their time, and a local church donates meeting space.

Child Care

For *Parents Recess* to really be a “recess” someone must care for the children while the parents are together. Child care is an essential component of the program, without which, most parents could not attend. For many parents, this is the first time they have left their child with someone else and the transition can be difficult. On-site child care helps assure parents that if need be, they can be with their child in a moment's notice. They can also periodically check in to see their children and ease their own minds as well.

Child care is provided in two separate rooms, one for infants to two years, and one for children older than two. The providers come from the community as well as through the local vocational school, where there is a child care training program. The students from the vocational school are able to receive school credit for the time they spend at *Parents Recess*.

There are activities for the children at *Parents Recess*. Snacks are provided as well as games and arts and crafts.

Highlights

Parents Recess continues to meet the needs of parents living in the rural areas surrounding Standish and Steep Falls. The numbers of parents and children attending is increasing and the formation of a second *Parents Recess* group is being considered. New networks are being formed in the community to expand efforts to support families, as well as new opportunities for information exchange. This community is taking its responsibility to families seriously and demonstrating that a collaboration between parents, churches, schools, and business can be a positive force in the support of families.

There were two unanticipated bonuses to the child care component: first, the child care providers gave additional support and reassurance to younger mothers and secondly, they created caring relationships with the children.

Suggestions

It is very important for parents to be involved in the programming planning. It is also important to use local resources (speakers) whenever possible.

Project SOAP

Overview

Project SOAP provides teen mothers with the opportunity to do their laundry free of charge once a week with a group of other teen mothers. It provides free lunch, free childcare and free activities weekly.

History

After a comprehensive community assessment in Cumberland County revealed parent education and parent support as the primary direction to take to prevent child abuse and neglect, several focus groups were held with parents from Cumberland County. These groups were to determine just what support and education would need to look like if parents were to really benefit. Adolescent parents were targeted as particularly at risk and three focus groups were comprised of only teen parents.

In these focus groups it became clear that the participants all chose to become parents; they wanted to have a child, and efforts to prevent the pregnancy would have been futile. These women described lives where they tried to be good parents, encountered community hostility and had very little financial and emotional resources. None of the women in these groups felt comfortable in traditional support settings or parent education settings. Many of them expressed disinterest in foster grandparents, or older more experienced mothers “mothering them.” They said they missed their peers most of all and felt isolated and alone in their lives. All said that being with other teen mothers would be helpful, and identified informal networking and peer support as critical.

These mothers also described being overwhelmed with their lives and unable to get out of their homes to do anything. They described long days alone with their child and TV. Many of them had no phones and would go days without speaking to anyone.

Community Demographics

In Maine, 1,869 women under the age of 20 gave birth in 1990. In Cumberland County there were 303 births; 8.6% of all births to women under the age of 20.

Program Components

On Fridays:

- Free laundry for young parents with free transportation and free childcare
- Free lunch
- Free activities at the YWCA teen parent services program
- Informal parenting support and information

Participants

Services are available to young parents. Participants may refer themselves or be referred by another participant or any community person.

Collaborators

The project is an example of a community collaboration that addresses the specific needs of a high risk and vulnerable population. PROP, Regional Transportation, the YWCA, Foster Grandparents, Project Maine Families, local businesses and individuals are using their resources effectively. The program lasts from 9:00 - 2:00 each Friday. The only staff paid specifically for this program is a young woman who was a former teen parent.

Highlights

We have been pleased by the consistency and responsibility shown by the participants. They are providing each other with informal support, information and material goods.

More than one-half of the participants were women who did not avail themselves of traditional services. The mothers are not only accomplishing laundry, they are establishing a group identity with their peers.

The young mothers are learning how to use a childcare facility responsibly, through their weekly contact with the Y's childcare professionals.

Another highlight involves the children of the teen mothers who are spending time in the day care. In most cases, this is their first experience in a day care as well as their first experiences in a group of other children.

Replication - N/A

Funding

Funding for the laundry and childcare come from Project Maine Families. The transportation costs are covered through the providing agencies' budgets. The Y provides overhead costs as well as lunch.

Suggestions

Talk to teenage parents and find out what they need and want. Tailor programs to those specific needs. Start small, be patient, introduce new ideas slowly and listen to "on the spot" feedback.

School/Family Community Events

Overview

The School/Family Community Events are designed by community members with the assistance of Project Maine Families staff to engage the community in supporting families and responding to the specific needs of parents and children in their neighborhoods.

History

The SFC events began as a result of Project Maine Families' focus groups with parents in Cumberland County. Parents told us they missed the feeling of community and wanted more opportunities for free or low cost activities involving the whole family. We initially sent a letter to all the school districts in the county (except Portland which was already working with the Portland Partnership), inquiring if there was any interest. We had many responses by telephone, and in seven cases followed up with in-person visits. It is important to note that the contact person was different in school districts. Sometimes it was a superintendent, other times it was a guidance counselor, principal or teacher. In the follow-up visits we discussed the goal of the school/family event and our intention to build communities that support families. We wanted schools that would commit themselves to collaborate in an ongoing way to develop and define their role as a public institution in the community supporting families.

Five areas were ready to begin the process.

Buxton — A rural community bordering two major counties in Maine. A town with no physical “center” and with many families commuting 20-25 miles each day to Portland.

Steep Falls — A very remote and rural elementary school with a small population (200 children K-2).

Gray/New Gloucester — A large community, an active school district, and a community with a high profile due to a very publicized child abuse case.

Brunswick — A large, urban community currently divided about a new school building location. A community where people feel strongly about issues. Also, a community with a large naval base housing many families in transition.

South Portland — The second largest community in the county with many indicators of high risk behaviors: unemployment, school drop-out rates, etc.

Program Components

- Free family fun for all ages
- Community based and oriented

Participants

Community members

Outreach

At each event, plans are made for ongoing work in each community. Members of the event’s workgroup meet and develop ideas for new ways to support families.

Evaluation

An evaluation form is available for each event.

Funding

Each community found local resources to help their event. PMF provided other resources.

Highlights

At each event the large numbers of families attending was encouraging. In the evaluations, people mentioned how much they liked the idea. The fact that entire families were encouraged to come was also important.

Suggestions

It's very important to have a workgroup made up of interested community people. It's best if they join because they are excited and not assigned to the group. It's also important to look at local resources and expectations and tailor the event(s) to those expectations. Expect that people want to help, expect success, expect new ideas.

Jack Family Center

Overview

The Family Center at Jack Elementary School located on Munjoy Hill provides the families of Jack students with a physical place within the school that is dedicated to making them feel welcome and a part of the school community. Parents gather to share common concerns and questions, to gather information about children, parenting and school policy, to get peer support and to develop a partnership with the school and community in which their children live and grow.

History

The Family Center was originally the idea of Jack's principal and vice-principal. It began in the corner of a guidance counselor's office with a few parents dropping in before and after school as they dropped off or picked up their children. It has subsequently grown into its own comfortably furnished space, with a full-time coordinator, extensive and varied programming including large school/family/community events.

Community

Portland is city of 60,000 people. The Family Center is located on Munjoy Hill, an old neighborhood in Portland with a large number of families living below the poverty level. Jack Elementary School is one of only two schools in Maine eligible

for complete Chapter 1 funding. Over 90 percent of the children enrolled at Jack are eligible for the free or reduced school lunch program.

Program Components

- Full-time parent center coordinator providing informal support and contact with parents
- Support group for parents
- Craft groups for parents
- Fun, family activities
- Programs tailored to the specific needs and requests of the families in the neighborhood and school

Participants

Participants are lower income parents, the majority of whom are not working outside the home. Many of the families are female headed single parent families.

Staff

There is one full-time coordinator. There are numerous community volunteers, both professional and others who donate time and service.

Outreach

There is a monthly newsletter distributed to all students attending Jack Elementary School. The coordinator also does informal outreach when appropriate.

Evaluation

Questionnaires are distributed to all program participants at conclusion of program. A more general questionnaire is distributed to all parents of Jack students to obtain specific information about future programming, use of the center, etc.

Funding

Jack Elementary School covers overhead expenses for the Center. Chapter 1 provides the salary for the coordinator. Project Maine Families provided money for the furniture and other monies for special events, childcare, supplies, refreshments and other odds and ends.

Highlights

The school is seen as a community resource for families, and a true partner in the development and education of children. Programs emphasize good times shared by parents and children and the value of each parent in the lives of his or her children. The Center tries to be responsive to changing need of families and to be available for support and information. Programs encourage the growth of friendships and support networks among parents and neighbors.

Suggestions

Start small and keep things simple. Ask families what they need. Develop programs that address the needs of the families in the community and are convenient to their schedules. Build in a means of “on the spot” feedback, both verbal and written.

Publications

Monthly newsletter.

Bibliography

- Barth, R.P., Hacking, S. and Ash, J.R. (Summer, 1988). "Preventing child abuse: An experimental evaluation of the child-parent enrichment project." *Journal of Primary Prevention* 8 (4): 201-217.
- Bavolek, S.J. and Dellinger-Bavolek, J. (Summer, 1986). *Increasing the Nurturing Parenting Skills of Families in Head Start*. Utah University, Salt Lake City, College of Health.
- Crnic, K., Greenberg, M., Ragozin, A., Robinson, N. and Basham, R. (1983). Effects of stress and social support on mothers and pre-term and full-term infants. *Child Development*, 54, 209-217.
- Googins, B. and Burden, D. (1987). "Vulnerability of working parents: balancing work and home roles." *Social Work*, July-August, 1987, 295-300.
- Hawaii Family Stress Center, (1991). *Healthy Start Manual*.
- Hunter, R., and Kilstrom, N. (1979). Breaking the cycle in abusive Families. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 136(10), 1320-1322.
- Maine Department of Human Services. (1993). *AFDC Statistics and Qualification Guidelines, and WIC Qualification Guidelines*. Maine Department of Human Services, Bureau of Income Maintenance.
- Maine Department of Human Services. (1991). *AFDC Caseload Characteristics, January, 1991*. Maine Department of Human Services, Office of Data, Research and Vital Statistics.
- Marks, J., McDonald, T., Bessey, W. and Palmer, M. (1989). *Risk Assessment in Child Protective Services: Risk Factors Assessed by Instrument-Based Models, A Review of the Literature*. National Child Welfare Resource Center for Management and Administration, University of Southern Maine, Portland, Maine
- State of Maine (1990). *Maine Vital Statistics, 1990*. Maine Department of Human Services, Offices of Data, Research and Vital Statistics, Augusta, Maine.

U.S. Bureau of the Census (1990), Data tape 1a.

U.S. Bureau of the Census (1991). *Statistical Abstracts of the United States: 1991* (111th Edition). Washington, DC.

Zedeck, S. and Mosier, K. (1990). "Work in the family and employing organization." *American Psychologist*, February, 1990, 240-248.