

A Field Guide to the Middle-Class U.S. Family ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Anthropologist Elinor Ochs and her colleagues at the University of California, Los Angeles have studied family life as far away as Samoa and the Peruvian Amazon region, but for the last decade they have focused on a society closer to home: the American middle class.

Why do American children depend on their parents to do things for them that they are capable of doing for themselves? How do U.S. working parents' views of "family time" affect their stress levels? These are just two of the questions that researchers at UCLA's Center on Everyday Lives of Families, or CELF, are trying to answer in their work.

By studying families at home-or, as the scientists say, "in vivo"-rather than in a lab, they hope to better grasp how families with two working parents balance child care, household duties and career, and how this balance affects their health and well-being.

The center, which also includes sociologists, psychologists and archeologists, wants to understand "what the middle class thought, felt and what they did," says Dr. Ochs. The researchers plan to publish two books this year on their work, and say they hope the findings may help families become closer and healthier. Ten years ago, the UCLA team recorded video for a week of nearly every moment at home in the lives of 32 Southern California families. They have been picking apart the footage ever since, scrutinizing behavior, comments and even their refrigerators's contents for clues.

The families, recruited primarily through ads, owned their own homes and had two or three children, at least one of whom was between 7 and 12 years old. About a third of the families had at least one nonwhite member, and two were headed by same-sex couples. Each family was filmed by two cameras and watched all day by at least three observers.

Among the findings: The families had very a child-centered focus, which may help explain the "dependency dilemma" seen among American middle-class families, says Dr. Ochs. Parents intend to develop their children's independence, yet raise them to be relatively dependent, even when the kids have the skills to act on their own, she says.

In addition, these parents tended to have a very specific, idealized way of thinking about family time, says Tami Kremer-Sadlik, a former CELF research director who is now the director of programs for the division of social sciences at UCLA. These ideals appeared to generate guilt when work intruded on family life, and left parents feeling pressured to create perfect time together. The researchers noted that the presence of the observers may have altered some of the families' behavior.

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In about 75% of the families, the mothers came home first and began to "gyrate" through the house, bouncing between the kids and their homework, groceries, dinner and laundry, according to the group's analysis published in the *Journal of Family Psychology* in 2009. When the fathers came home, 86% of the time at least one child didn't pay attention to him.

"The kids are oblivious to their parents' perspectives," says Dr. Ochs.

The researchers theorize that stems from a tendency in U.S. society to adapt to and focus on the children, rather than teaching children to focus on others. And, Americans tend to encourage children to pay attention to objects more than faces, emphasizing colors and shapes, for instance, over people, says Dr. Ochs. In Samoa, children are expected to be attentive to others from a very young age, and parents stress focusing on facial expressions, says Dr. Ochs.

Researchers are also examining how U.S. parents view family life and work. Parents tended to describe a "very prescribed way of being together," says Dr. Kremer-Sadlik.

They commonly used terms like "family night," "family movie," or "family breakfast," and it was understood that the activity was meant to be child-focused time and not include others outside the family. This same vision of "family time" wasn't seen in Italian families, for instance, the researchers found in work published in the journal *Time and Society* in 2007.

This structured and idealized way of being together appears to pressure parents to achieve these moments and also avoid another instances that might ruin it, like a child's temper tantrum.

"We wanted to highlight to parents that they have a lot of other opportunities for this family time," when they can feel united, supported and connected, says Dr. Kremer-Sadlik.

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