TORONTO LIFE

BY WENDY DENNIS

Finding time for the family

JIM ALLEN

What working parents want to help them beat the clock: a special report on the problems of Having It All

Ellen Neeman has the timing of her mornings down to a science now. Her alarm rings at 6:30. If she arises then, she has until 7:20, precisely, to shower, dry her hair, apply her makeup, and dress for her job at the Bank of Nova Scotia, where she is a solicitor. At 7:20 she awakens her 6-year-old daughter, Jordana. That leaves Ellen exactly forty minutes to fix Jordana's breakfast and hustle her daughter through the morning routine of brushing teeth, tying shoelaces and downing her Cheerios. That also leaves some leeway for the temper tantrum Jordana will inevitably have when she is informed she cannot wear the one T-shirt in her wardrobe that is filthy and ripped.

Once Jordana is rolling, Ellen wakes up 3-year-old Jonathan. If all goes well, her babysitter, Angella, will arrive on the dot of 8. Which gives Ellen exactly twenty minutes to drive Jordana to the car pool. It would be simpler if the car pool came to her house, but Ellen lives too far east, and the other parents have their own schedules, and it was either

WITH RESEARCH BY JOHN WELLWOOD AND JANET CROCKER

"The danger I see is that you can lose sight of what it's all for. Careers were meant to give satisfaction. What's the point of giving so much there that you wind up on a chain gang?"

drive your kid to us or forget it, so Ellen took what she could get. By 8:20, assuming no traffic tie-ups, she is back at home reminding Angella about the dinner menu or gym day or field trip at the school Jordana attends in the afternoon. It is forty minutes by TTC from her north Toronto home to the corner of Bay and King, and even if she doesn't get a seat, which she usually doesn't, Ellen looks forward to that time as the most sacred in her day. It is forty minutes for herself, to read *The Globe and Mail*, or reflect, two options she considers luxuries in her life.

Exiting from the subway she buys a croissant and a coffee and sits down at her desk at 9:15 to begin her working day. Typically, she has a full agenda: calls, client meetings, paperwork, dictation for her secretary, problems to solve. Some days, she says, are more hectic than others. Two nights of the week she arrives home between 6:45 and 7. Two other evenings she has to make it home by 6:30 so Angella can go to typing classes. Employment and Immigration Canada actively encourages immigrants to upgrade their skills so they can get landed, at which point they often stop working as babysitters. Mondays she leaves the office no later than 5:20 to pick Angella and the two kids up at Jordana's ballet class. If there is a late-breaking crisis on a Monday she has no choice but to bolt. So she does, feeling guilty. Dinners consist of zapping in the microwave whatever Angella has prepared, then wolfing it down at a corner of the kitchen table she has staked out, while Jonathan climbs in her lap and dangles pictures under her nose, and Jordana cuts, pastes and barrages her with questions. This, she says, her voice dripping with irony, is her "quality time." The kids go down at 9, after the fifteen games of Snakes and Ladders and Lego and the bedtime stories, but usually there is a half-hour or so of running up and down the stairs to get them drinks or to change their tapes or calm their fears so they can fall asleep. At 10, Ellen is free to open her briefcase and prepare the work she has brought home. By midnight, she has usually "had it." Which leaves her exactly 6½ hours to sleep before the alarm rings again.

That's on a good day. On a bad day, for instance the day that Angella was a half-hour late, Ellen is at the door, chain-smoking. Or on the telephone, begging her mother to pinch hit. One particularly ghastly morning, Jonathan had dirtied his diaper, and the mess was everywhere, but Angella was late and there was no time to change him because if she didn't get going that second, the car pool would leave without Jordana, and she would be late for work and the whole house of cards would come tumbling down. She recalls the scene, laughing: "I'm laughing now, but I assure you I wasn't laughing then. I was absolutely frantic. I was trying to buckle this sleeping, shit-covered kid into the car, worrying about staining my suit, and swearing to him that I'd make it up to him some day." Occasionally the circuits get overloaded and something snaps. Angella found the untouched dinner Ellen had simply "forgotten" to eat the night before in the microwave one morning. Once, she drove Jordana to the wrong house because one of the car-pooling families had split up midterm, and she couldn't remember which of the joint-custodial parents was driving that day.

Life would be somewhat simpler for Ellen if her husband, Shaul, a physicist, were in town during the week to spell her off. But an opportunity arose in Ottawa, which, at this stage in his career, they decided he should take. Shaul returns on weekends, pitching in with the shopping and chores and kids then, but during the week Ellen lives, she imagines, what must be the typical life of most single parents all of the time. Even if her husband worked in Toronto, she realizes that she, like all of the working mothers she knows, would still have to bear, on her own, the burden of orchestrating the endless arrangements and schedules that keep the machinery of her family life oiled and operating.

Not long ago, Ellen was having lunch with a colleague who mentioned the name of another lawyer involved in an extramarital affair. "I said that it was impossible. No way. She couldn't have young children." When her lunch companion assured her that the woman did, Ellen was amazed: "I have to take my hat off to her. I really do. A lawyer, young kids, and she's fitting in an affair too? Now *that* is awesome time management."

Ellen Neeman is a working parent. She works because she finds her work rewarding. She has children for the same reason. She is

WHAT WORKING PARENTS WANT FROM THE COMMUNITY

Extended daycare programs: From 8:30 a.m. or earlier until 6 p.m. in every elementary school in Toronto, with enough spaces available to meet the demand. Day camps should follow suit. Where transportation to and from the school is an issue, schools could help alleviate the burden of research put on parents by presenting them with the transportation options available in their area.

Wheel-trans for kids: To solve the logistics of transporting youngsters from daycare or school to lessons or afterschool caregivers. Taxi services could also help here, offering personalized service that ensures the same, known driver for the child each day.

Stand-in caregivers: There appears to be a backlash from some toddler programs and co-operative nursery schools in the city. Manor Road Nursery School, for instance, a parent-run co-op, has instituted a rule that states (with rare exceptions) only a parent, not a hired provider, and not even a grandparent, may participate on duty days. Parents must also sit on the board or a committee. Somebody should ask the people who make these rules what rock they've been under while a major social revolution has been going on. Until there are enough programs in the city to service a variety of specialized needs, working parents require the option of sending stand-ins, of paying a slightly higher fee in lieu of participation, or of making their contribution by performing administrative functions.

Kids' hotline: Some entrepreneur could make a killing in this city by establishing a data base with centralized information about everything relating to kids—daycares by neighborhood with updated information on spaces currently available, community programs offered, lessons given privately and by whom, and so on. Parents need to plug into this information quickly.

Rent-an-adolescent: With all the unemployed youth in the city, one wonders why some smart young entrepreneur hasn't figured out that parents would pay handsomely for the services of a responsible teenager ~~to~~ walk their children to and from school, stay with them until they get home, and maybe lend a hand tossing a salad at dinner hour. Where are all the fliers for College Pro Walkers?

Rent-a-grandparent: Are there any lonely and able elderly citizens out there who would occasionally relish some time to spend with a child after school and earn some money by doing it? Kids love to hear stories about the "olden days," and grandmas and grandpas love to tell them. Again, where is the clever entrepreneur to simplify working parents' lives by co-ordinating such a service?

Meals on wheels: Working parents, especially single parents, refer to dinnertime as the arsenic hour. They'd like to call a number once in a while, and have a decent, home-cooked, affordable meal arrive on their doorsteps. Presto. Is anybody out there listening?

STEPHEN QUINLAN

"The family should not be prepared to make sacrifices for careers—that's backward. What I owe my wife and kids is so much more than what I owe my clients or colleagues"

not about to give up her career, nor, if she wants to afford what she considers to be a decent life in the city of Toronto, would she have the luxury. Although her job is demanding, it is still less demanding in terms of hours than a career in private practice would be, and she specifically chose this position to allow her more time for her family. She resents the assumption that her career is less important to her than to those without children, and she is tired of feeling that she has to apologize to society for having them. "I have been asked where my priorities lie, and I say that when I'm at work my job comes first and when I'm at home my family comes first. I just wish it were simpler to make the transition between the two worlds."

A Martian landing in Toronto circa 1986, and peering into the lives of the city's working parents would travel home with a very bizarre report indeed. He would observe a species with telephones growing out of their ears and daytimers sprouting from their hands, who speak to mates through notes tacked to the fridge and check off lists in their dreams. What a strange place they have come to, these children of the '60s with their bucolic vision of laid-back lives. They have sacrificed spontaneity, socializing and the luxury to do what one parent called "normal things—like watching the news." Nor do they have the opportunity of winding down to shift gears from one sphere to the other. Consequently, most are convinced that they do a half-assed job in both. The family dinner has gone the way of the brontosaurus. If they do manage a night out, usually they are so exhausted that they find themselves "at Cibo, face forward in the plates by 10:30." And then there is the matter of the children. One 3-year-old boy became so disoriented on a holiday Monday when he was actually at home with both of his parents together that he asked, "Is this the day I go to daycare or go shopping with my daddy?" Some of the women deliver babies, call clients from their hospital rooms and return to their offices within a matter of weeks. I am reminded, listening to them describe their lives, of the old joke about the Russian peasant women who "drop baby in field and go on plowing." A day of rest has virtually vanished. "Sunday night is heart-attack night," one father told me.

Their worst fear is that a kink in the works will throw the whole delicate balance of their lives out of whack. What if the nanny gets sick or, God forbid, should leave? What if they get a call that the system broke down and their kids are sitting in the middle of Christie Pits? Daily existence is sometimes so precarious that one more item on the agenda puts them right over the edge. It was single parent and communications consultant Reva Nelson's furnace kicking off one winter night that tipped the scales for her. "I was not a rational being. They should have phone lines for single parents. Dial-an-Affirmation. Just a warm, soothing voice that comes on and tells you that tomorrow is going to come."

The ones with nannies wonder how the ones without nannies manage. The ones without nannies wonder how the single parents manage. The single parents wonder how the single parents without extended families in the city manage. And the ones without extended families to call in an emergency try not to ask themselves how they manage. They just do. "I just have to open my eyes and not think about it and get up," says Marsha Chesley, CBC script contract administrator and mother of Rebecca, 7, and Aaron, 4. "Because, if I open my eyes and start to think about it, I won't get up."

WHAT WORKING PARENTS WANT IN THE WORKPLACE

Parental leave: With guaranteed return and full benefits that can be taken by either parent, for as long as six months, at any time within the first few years of a child's life.
Family leave: The option of time off for birthdays, anniversaries, special family events, as well as a child's illness. Sabbaticals or leaves of absence when needed.
Workplace daycare referral centres: To help employees find regular and emergency child care.
Work options: Such as at-home work and teleconferencing. The option of taking overtime in either time or money. Permanent part-time and job-sharing options for men and women at middle- and upper-management levels, with guaranteed return and prorated benefits.
Workplace daycare centres: To which children of employees not using the centre can be brought on a pay-as-you-go basis in emergencies.
Flextime or "best time" hours system: Whereby workers can create their own schedules, coming in as early as 7 a.m. and leaving as early as 3 p.m., so long as they are there during core hours and get their work done.

Deborah Bernstein and Sam Freeman have three children: Nicky, 7, Calen, 6, and Jed, 22 months. Deborah is a manager in the children's television department at the CBC. Sam is a senior executive at Freeman's Formal Wear. They recently moved to the Annex, within walking distance of the Institute of Child Study, where Nicky and Calen attend school. They moved specifically to simplify their lives. Now the kids can walk to school and to the nearby park. The move has significantly reduced the hysteria quotient and transportation blues in their lives. Deborah Bernstein considers herself a "very lucky person," and she is right to do so. "My life is a dream compared to most. We've been able to afford care in the home for my kids, to call an agency if the nanny is ill. I have a husband who adores his family and wants to participate, and not just in the fun stuff. That puts me in about .05 per cent of dual-career families. Oh, we don't travel or get out much, and I had an English nanny once whose wardrobe I would have killed for. Sometimes I just dream about going to a restaurant that doesn't have chicken fingers and highchairs. I fantasize about waking up one morning and not having to look for the prize in the bottom of the cereal box, then stuffing all the cereal back in, sweeping the floor and flipping a coin to see who gets it before I leave for work. Every now and then I'm just holding it all together and I get the feeling that I can't drive one more kid one more place. Still, I'm the exception. If you changed two to three crucial circumstances in my life, I couldn't carry off what I do now. If I couldn't afford a nanny, if I didn't have a husband who shares the load, if I didn't have a mother who was there to pick up the pieces in a crisis, I couldn't lead the life I do. I mean, I don't know how some people cope. When do you call it a day? When does the stress get so bad you can't handle it any more? What do you do if you're a single parent with three kids on a waiting list for subsidized daycare?"

For a generation that believed it had the clarity of vision and tenacity to change the world, many of them are remarkably quiescent and unimaginative about inventing ways to transform the quality of their lives, which, most agree, desperately need transforming. And most are reluctant to seek the support of government, the social institutions and the corporations for which they work. Ask them to fantasize about the script

"To be the world's greatest stockbroker–big deal! But to have your kid charge up the steps and throw his arms around you at night–that's a big deal"

they would write for themselves in a perfect world, and they look at you as if *you* were from outer space. They will get annoyed with the question, and irritation will creep into their voices, and they will tell you, as one woman who "tries" to be home with her two preschoolers two nights a week, who works a full day every weekend and who, last summer, spent an entire month travelling on business, told me: "*I don't have time to fantasize.*"

I am 36 years old. I came of age in the eye of one of the giddiest, most affluent periods in history. It was a time riddled with options, and a time when it still seemed possible, fashionable even, to dream. The notion that we might have it all hypnotized my generation with an unrelenting, almost mystical force. Suddenly, everywhere were women who claimed that a rewarding career, a loving relationship and 1.7 adoring kids were their birthright. I took this to be the truth. Most of the women I knew took this to be the truth. Eventually, even some of the men I knew took this to be the truth. Through a curious melding of blind drive, idealistic vision and what, of late, appears to have been a rather astonishing leap of self-delusion, my generation embraced the conviction that all was ours for the taking. So it busied itself razing pasts, raising children and constructing, on the rocky, rubbled landscape, glittering futures. But the cracks are beginning to show. The ironies have become overpowering. We no longer know how to dream.

I am sitting here now thinking about my own compromises, and about the compromises of people around me, who, in the name of success and career and a better life, are denying themselves what they seem to want most–the chance to watch their kids grow up. I sense, just beneath the surface of their supremely organized lives, a haunting sadness. I hear, behind their explanations and their justifications and their rationalizations, a noisy desperation. Try, for a moment, to imagine a way out, I ask one woman. She replies that there is no way out, that you don't move up the banking ladder by being "creative and left-wing," that there is a price and her price is not sleeping much and running her family's life "military-style." And then I think about her children, and my own child, and I wonder where this road is leading.

I am stubborn enough to believe that there is a way out. And that it lies somewhere between transforming the priorities in people's heads and those in society at large. I am not so naive as to think that the solutions are simple, but then our generation's solutions have never been simple. Indeed, we have had more than our share of brutal experience with complexity. Still, we have managed it before. We can manage it again. The first stumbling block is going to be the one in our perceptions. Leaping it will mean drastically rethinking the notion of work itself: imagining it as something to be done intensely some of the time, not so intensely at others, or, at other times, now and then. We will need to agitate for daycare in the workplace so we can wander down and have lunch with our kids, watch them take their first halting steps. So they can wander up and visit us at our work. Reclaiming our families will involve rewriting laws, altering the way public funds are spent, creating mechanisms in the workplace, in our culture and our own lives. Personal sacrifices will have to be made, and we will have to stop expecting women to make them first. We are going to need persistence and determination and courage and imagination. We are going to have to work very hard. But then, hard work is something our generation appears to understand.

WHAT WORKING PARENTS WANT

FROM THE GOVERNMENT

Increase the number of holidays to which employees are entitled. Two weeks annually to begin with is incompatible with family demands. Create more national holidays and long weekends throughout the year.

Allow Sunday store openings. Working parents have limited time available to shop.

Allow parents to deduct the full cost of child care as an allowable business expense.

Patricia Chew, 34, is sitting in the fifth-floor University Avenue office of Terrence Belford & Co. Inc., the public relations firm of which she is vice-president. It is 10 o'clock on a Friday morning and Patricia is on the telephone: "Hi, babe. Can you do me a favor? Today is hot dog day at school and Spencer is there with no hot dog money. Do you think you could drop by his school? Yeah, $1 is plenty. Thanks."

Patricia is talking to Alan Ericson, the man with whom she lives. Alan is a reporter for CFNY-FM radio. He works shifts, which is why he happens to be home at 10 this morning and can drive from their Manning Avenue home to 7-year-old Spencer's school with the hot dog money. Patricia remembers when such minor crises were not so easily solved. She remembers returning from Spain to Toronto in 1980, a separated parent with an infant, $500 in her pocket, no car, no place to live and no child care. She remembers visiting all of the "baby dumping grounds," with no outdoor recreational facilities, with babies sitting on the floor not doing much, and she remembers the waiting lists and the exorbitant costs. She has lived through a time when the only acceptable and subsidized daycare she could find was so far from her workplace that she had to drag her starving and weary child home on two streetcars, wheel him across the park in the dead of winter as she clutched laundry and groceries, and then stand at her apartment stove cooking supper while he tugged at her pant leg.

For a few years, until last January, Patricia worked as a CBC reporter. For eight months in 1984 she was assigned to *The Journal*. News reporting meant long shifts, unpredictable schedules, weekend work and, sometimes, ten- to twelve-hour days. "You have to be very committed to be a reporter. The story always comes first. In news, you're never home before 6:30. Still, I had it luckier than most. Mark Starowicz, the executive producer, is a father. When his kid was sick, he'd stay home. *The Journal* was a funny kind of place. Sometimes there'd be anywhere up to a half-dozen kids walking around on a PD day. There are a lot of TV monitors there and they'd all be switched to *Sesame Street*. And sometimes the crew and other reporters would amuse the kids too. Kids love to come to their parents' workplace, and, by and large, they don't wreak havoc. Then your colleagues become a kind of surrogate family. It's nice for the child and it's nice for the workers. But I have no doubt that I was very fortunate at the CBC. That kind of thinking requires a certain level of empathy on the part of an employer."

Patricia took her present public relations position in January because she wanted more time with Spencer, and less complication in her life. Before, Spencer was in full-time daycare from 8:30 a.m. until 6 p.m. Even then, she had to hire a high school student to pick him up at 6, take him home on the TTC and

"Kids are very demanding if you take them seriously. When Peter was smaller, he'd always say to me: 'Dad–you play,' and I'd think, I don't know how to play, Peter. I work"

stay with him until she got home, which was sometimes by 6:30, but not always. And then she had to be ready to cope alone with a small child who hadn't seen her all day. Now, working for a fairly small outfit, she works 9 to 5, no weekends, and can pick Spencer up at school herself, "which he really enjoys." Now she has the flexibility and freedom to take time off for a dentist appointment or school concert. Now Alan can relieve her, and the two of them can wind down and have a glass of wine after work while dinner sizzles on the barbecue and Spencer plays in the yard.

Patricia Chew is, by nature, a soft-spoken individual, but her voice rises considerably when she begins talking about the way she thinks children are perceived in this country. "There seems to be an attitude here that children get in the way of your life. In a Chinese restaurant, there is no such thing as a table for two. In Spain, kids are everywhere until all hours. Maître d's rush over when they see a baby and ask to warm a bottle or strain some food. Here, you get hostile looks if you wheel in a pram. But parents shouldn't have to be confined to Ponderosa and Swiss Chalet. They should be able to have mussels and brie too. Kids are not horrible creatures. The earlier they get exposure to civilized life, the sooner they become civilized."

Patricia doesn't think she should have to choose between work and family, and what she calls "this whole bogeyman of selfishness rising out of the lake again" scares her. Her mother raised her to believe that she couldn't have both, but she thinks otherwise. She realizes, however, that she cannot manage this alone, without a major turnaround in social thinking, without "some real support from the culture." She dreams of a future that allows her much more of an ebb and flow between work, family, travel and other interests, and, by scaling down the intensity of her work, she has already taken a few baby steps on her own to get there. Ideally, she would like to be self-employed, taking contracts as she wanted and needed to. That too may come. "Our generation is an extreme generation. We went off the deep end, but I think we're finally starting to smarten up. I'm growing tomatoes in my backyard and I am loving it. But I'm 34 and it's taken me this long to get to the point where I *could* love it. Maybe I just had to prove something to myself before I could enjoy my tomatoes. I hope that when Spencer grows up there will be a much greater understanding of what it takes to make both worlds work in harmony. You know, a friend of mine always says that having a kid is like having a Porsche. If you don't have one, you don't miss it. But once you have one, nothing else will do."

Talk to working parents about the child-care situation in this city and words such as "shocking" and "appalling" and "unconscionable" get bandied about. Apparently, it is easier to find first-rate service for a Porsche. Daycare is just an abstract concept until you have a child. After you have had a child, it is a gut-wrenching issue. And it is the issue that spills first from the lips of every working parent I talk to. Patricia Chew says that daycare is "the backbone of it all." That it is impossible to lead anything approaching a normal life without good, reliable daycare. Which suggests that there are legions of working parents in this town leading spectacularly abnormal lives. Because the reality, according to Jane Beach, a daycare coordinator for the City of Toronto, is that there is only enough licensed daycare in the province to service one child in ten whose parents are in the labor force. People such as Ellen Neeman don't need to hear the statistics. They *are* the statistics. Before she could hire help, she scrambled around like everyone else she knows, holding her breath to see if Jordana would make the waiting list cut. "Getting your kid into daycare in this city is like trying to get her into Harvard."

And then, of course, there is the cost. Ten thousand dollars per year is the magic number. Foreign nannies earn, by law, $827.50 a month, a figure that includes their allowance for room and board. Many upper-income families, however, can and are willing to pay considerably more. So off go the best nannies to the highest bidders, up goes the demand, and middle-income families, whose earnings do not qualify them for subsidies, are left behind in the dust, gasping from the hit of the $10,000 in aftertax dollars they must shell out just to stay in the running. Susan Roadburg, teaching master in fashion merchandising at Seneca College of Applied Arts and Technology and mother of Marisa, 9, and Joel, 7, remembers when, a few years ago, the government "quietly legislated" nannies' wages. Because she was on wage restraints then, her salary rose by four per cent. Her nanny's salary leapfrogged forty per cent. "I had a pen-pal relationship with Lloyd Axworthy [minister of Employment and Immigration] that year." (On average, the legislation resulted in a twenty-five-per-cent increase for foreign nannies, according to George Davidson, consultant, Foreign Worker Recruitment, Employment and Immigration Canada.) Aaron Chesley's space at the George Brown College Learning Centre, which is

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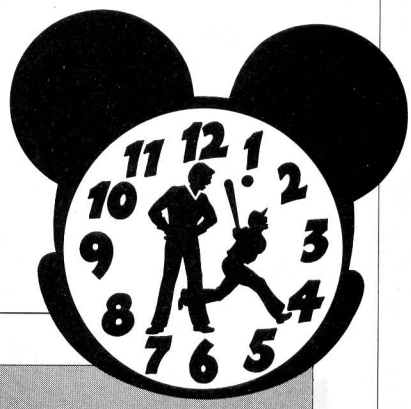

WHAT WORKING PARENTS WANT

AFTER SCHOOL

Daycare/education programs: The schools are set up already for many kinds of afterschool activities and lessons. Schools could arrange for local piano teachers, athletic coaches and the like to offer lessons after school, in the schools, for those parents who wish them for their children, thus solving the problem of transporting youngsters to and fro. Of course, parents can also acknowledge that their kids might still grow up to be fully realized human beings without film animation and investment counselling classes after school. There *is* the option, for older kids, of forgetting the classes they can't walk to.

Bob Novak and Denise Bertrand are two examples of entrepreneurs who have twigged to the demand of working parents for reliable and inventive afterschool care. Bob runs Bob's Sports in Manhattan for the children of Upper East Side parents. He picks up kids at their schools or homes in his Dodge van, then transports them to public facilities such as ice rinks and playing fields for organized sports. On a nice day they go to the museum or zoo or take the Staten Island ferry. Is there a Bob in Toronto?

For four years Denise Bertrand has run the After School Alternative Program (ASAP) in her downtown studio apartment for kids attending The Mabin School. (Next year she will take students from Rosedale Public School.) She established the program because of her freelance schedule and love of kids. She hires a driver to pick the kids up at school and deliver them to her door, and operates on all PD days and school holidays. The kids build forts, play games, work on art projects and rehearse theatrical productions. On full days there are outings to the Beaches, the Island and to the museum. Parents can pick up their children at 6 on afterschool days, and at 5:30 other times.

STYLING: SUSAN JONES/HAIR & MAKEUP: ROSE-MARIE/SPORTS EQUIPMENT: SPORTS EXPERTS COLLEGIATE, EATON CENTRE/BRIEFCASES: BETTY HEMMINGS LEATHERGOODS/MOTHER'S WARDROBE: HOLT RENFREW, JEWELLERY, KSP, RUNNING SHOES, FOOTLOCKER/FATHER'S WARDROBE: JACKET, ALAN GOOCH-THE BRICK SHIRT HOUSE, SHIRT, SPORTS CHALET, BOW TIE, BROGUE, WATCH, CLUB MONACO, SHOES, PINO CARINA/GIRL'S WARDROBE: SOUTH SIDE KIDS/BOY'S WARDROBE: CLUB MONACO/EYEGLASSES: JOSEPHSON OPTICIANS

Finding time for the family *from page 29*

considered to be one of the finest in the city, costs $440 a month. (If he were still in the baby section, it would cost $495.) Still, if Aaron has not been picked up by 5:30, there is a late fee of $5 for the first five minutes, and $1 per minute after that. In addition, Rebecca Chesley's lunchtime supervision and afterschool care program at the Toronto Board of Education's Hawthorne II Bilingual School cost $160 per month. If both of the Chesley children were still in full-time daycare, as is often the case, it would cost more than $11,000 to keep them there. And the government would permit their parents to deduct $2,000 per child for an expense that allows them to work in the first place. What's more, they would still reap none of the benefits of live-in help, such as housekeeping and occasional evening babysitting (services for which they must often pay more), or flexibility in an emergency. Add to these costs the expense of camps and skating lessons and transportation fees, and you begin to understand why middle-income, dual-career families with a couple of kids, who happen to be so bold as to want topnotch care for their children, are on the phone a lot answering to VISA.

Three years ago the City of Toronto committed $1-million in a direct-grant system for nonprofit daycares to raise workers' salaries. (This year it is committing $3-million more.) Caregivers now earn about $15,500 annually, although they still earn less than workers at the Metro Zoo. By dangling the carrot of greater density and other perks, the City is also negotiating with developers and employers to include workplace daycare space in new buildings, and has proposed to the Legislature that there be property tax relief for companies with on-site centres. But the solutions have so far been piecemeal. According to daycare activists such as Laurel Rothman, spokesperson for the Ontario Coalition for Better Daycare, the main advocacy organization in the province, "any major revision is going to have to be a joint effort of three levels of government. No longer can public policy in Ontario be relying fully on the market system to satisfy the needs of people." While the provinces have the jurisdiction, the Feds have the hard cash. Some of that cash will have to be injected to effect any dramatic change. The feeling among daycare activists such as Rothman is that the new Liberal government, as a result of its accord with the NDP, is making more noise about the issue, and *has* taken the problem more seriously by undertaking a wide-ranging internal review of the issue, spanning eight or nine ministries. The review is exploring, among other things, the possibility of introducing a comprehensive child-care policy designed to shift daycare from a welfare service to a more universal public service, such as education or health. But the Liberals have been in office for more than a year, and Michelle Noble, assistant deputy minister in charge of Family Services and Income Maintenance, is saying things such as, "There is a review of child care under way" and "There has been involvement and consultation" and "It is too early to get into specific targets" and "We hope to have some decisions within the next few months"–and still there are no concrete proposals. Meanwhile, the scrambling goes on. Chaviva Hosek, past president and presently a board member of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, has heard the promises before and she is getting tired of hearing them: "Politicians have the most conservative family lifestyles in Canada. People are always ahead of politicians."

What the working parents to whom I spoke want, and want now, is the option of decent, affordable daycare of many types. They want the option of subsidized daycare in the first few years of launching an entrepreneurial venture, until their businesses can reasonably be expected to turn a profit, and they want flextime at daycares and "floating" personnel, whom their kids already know, to provide backup at home when those kids are sick. They want an entire rethinking of the taxation philosophy, which scales tax burdens to family burdens and not to income alone, and which would allow them to afford the choice of private providers. They think they have a right to ask for these concessions because they happen to subscribe to what is still, judging by daycare and taxation policy, considered to be a rather offbeat view in this country: that children are a benefit to society. Says Deborah Bernstein: "I happen to believe that if society values kids, it has to provide facilities to enhance their development, to grapple with the pressure of the cost and stress involved in getting them to and from, to offer affordable home care for when they are sick. Daycare is not just a facility. It is an attitude. You can't get all upset about the breakdown of the nuclear family and not provide support systems and work programs to preserve it."

Robert Cook has practised law for four years. He is 36 years old, works as an assistant Crown attorney with the Department of Justice and is married to Ginette Cook, a French immersion teacher. Together they have one child, 2-year-old Martin. Robert Cook looks like most of the other lawyers rushing through the halls of the University Avenue district court this particular Monday, with their clients in tow and their leather briefcases and their sense of urgency. He is tall, slender, moustached, smartly dressed and good-looking in an athletic sort of way. What sets him apart is the fact that when Martin was 1½ years old, Robert went to his boss and told him that he was dissatisfied with the lack of influence he was having on Martin's life, and wanted some arrangement permitting him to devote more time to his son. A Crown's hours are long, there is a good deal of overtime, and he knew the pattern would only continue or get worse. When he came through the door, drained, at 7:30 each night, he found himself wishing that his son would just go away. The child-care books told him that a child's personality is pretty well formed by age 2. He wanted to make a mark.

The biggest hurdle was the one in his own head. No other men he knew had made such a request. In the fast-track, downtown professional milieu in which he operated, such thinking was lunacy. How was it going to be perceived? Would he be thought of as less committed to his career? His worst fear was that his boss would simply say no and that he would lose his job. It was a risk he was prepared to take. He had seen too many cases of colleagues and friends so blindly driven toward career success that everything else crumbled around them. Marriages disintegrated, kids became strangers.

His boss called him in a couple of days later and offered him the option of working two days a week. Because they are in court every day, Crowns' schedules are often extremely unpredictable. Trials usually begin Mondays and there is no way of knowing how long they will take. So Robert was handed more predictable tasks, such as pretrial conferences. He knew that these assignments would be less challenging than court work and, consequently, less rewarding, but the trade-off was a fair one in his view. Occasionally he would be assigned a file from the beginning, and there'd be a trial that went over that week, and he'd have to be flexible too, but he thinks it was a very small price to pay.

Beginning last September, for seven months, he worked only two days a week. Ginette worked 2½ days, which meant that the family could be together as a unit three days, and Martin went to daycare on the one day their job schedules overlapped. Without question, the change set the family back financially. He lost $10,000 in wages by cutting back to part-time, and had to dip into an RRSP for $2,500. They didn't have much disposable cash, and for that period he marked time in his career. His days alone with his son were filled with subway rides and trips to the museum and playing in the snow. When Martin napped, he did the laundry and the tidying.

A transformation took place inside Robert Cook's head during that time: "I thought it would be easy street, you know, a little holiday. But I started trying to stimulate him, clean up, make meals, and I'd be exhausted at the end of the day. At work, the adrenalin is going and it gets you through the day and at the end of the day you have the sense that you've done something concrete, and you've earned some money doing it. You don't get the same immediate feedback from a kid.

"You learn to see it from the other side. I used to think I was entitled to put my feet up when I got home. Now I take him and Ginette gets a breather. Before, if Martin hurt himself, he'd run to her. If he hurts himself now, he runs to whomever is closest. I was happy, previously, if Ginette put him to bed. Now we both rush to see who gets to put him to bed. It's so much fun. I've been a lawyer for four years and I will probably be a lawyer until I'm 60 or 65. At the end, will it make any difference at all that I took off seven months?

"My attitude toward work has changed too. At one time I tended to overprepare. Now I'm well-prepared, but more efficient. If I have a trial I try to be in the office between 7:30 and 8, when Martin's still sleeping, so I can get home to be with him. I *make* the time now, and I don't have the guilt. You know, a lot of other men came up to me and told me they were envious of this chance I had. I kept hearing, 'I'd do it if I could.' There are a lot of lawyers out there with crushing overheads to maintain for whom the idea of taking seven months off is inconceivable. But I think if there were more of a demand for these kinds of things, they would happen. It's tough, I know, because by and large society is not set up to do it, but I think it *can* be done. I had no idea what my boss would say. People probably wondered how it was going to work out, and yet it did. It didn't seem to disrupt things at all. People are their own worst enemies. You get locked into a lifestyle with competing priorities and it seems like an enormously difficult thing to do, and then you go through it, and it's not so difficult at all. It all comes from within. I had a need and I made a demand. Then the system accommodated it."

Manufacturers Life is one of the companies that gets trotted out in stories such as this one, when it is time to talk about companies that are actively attempting, through policy and creative thinking, to respond to the needs of working parents like Robert Cook. Its comprehensive Work and Family Program offers employees, among other things, flextime, the chance to work part-time, retaining benefits and returning from their families in a consulting capacity, and the opportunity to arrange at-home work. It has established job-sharing structures such as the one between a former manager who returned after having kids and another who was easing into retirement. It provides a supplementary plan for maternity leave, unheard of in most companies, in which the employer covers the difference between UIC benefits and sixty per cent of the worker's salary. It has established a daycare arrangement with a neighborhood centre whereby employees have the right of first refusal on vacancies. Unquestionably, Manufacturers Life has been a groundbreaker and luminary in this field, but the problem is, it is starting to get really tiresome to keep reading about the same company.

One or two others are following its lead–Imperial Oil and Warner-Lambert spring to mind–but for the most part the workplace has been comatose in this respect, failing to grasp the fact that there is something serious going on out there. Of the dozen or so organizations contacted–such companies as IBM and Labatt's and *The Toronto Sun*, to name a few–by far the majority of the human resources people say they don't have a formal policy on creative options to help employees balance work and family. Then they say they don't think they need to have a policy. *There hasn't been much of a demand for it.* Initially, this explanation seems preposterous. How can this be when my notebooks are filling with urgent and ample proof of the demand? So I question those who claim they want the options whether they have ever bothered to ask for them:

"No."

"Why?"

"It wouldn't be appreciated around here. My commitment would be called into question. It wouldn't go anywhere, so I wouldn't pose it."

"How will your employer know the kind of stress you're working under unless you tell him?"

"Look, I've already given up a lot by not working nights and weekends. You're asking

me to go into Never Never Land."

"Well, what's your way out? How are you going to get closer to the life you want to live?"

"Maybe I'll win the lottery."

Those who *have* bothered to ask, much to their surprise, have often found their employers willing to negotiate. In one case, an accountant requested the opportunity to work three days a week. When her firm refused, she sought the option elsewhere. When she got it, they counteroffered with a deal sweet enough to make her stay. Women are usually the ones who ask–which is good for them, but problematic in another way. The danger is that they will become ghettoized again in part-time work, thus locking them exclusively into lower-paid positions, reinforcing traditional images in their children's minds, and turning back the clock. Much as I would like to report otherwise, men like Robert Cook are still the rare, rare exception. Part-timers and job sharers in management are still the exception too. They know this. They feel remarkably blessed. Some of them prefer to talk off the record. They don't want to be seen as having let down the feminist cause or admitting they failed as Superwomen. They don't want to be viewed as less committed to their careers. They don't want to rock the boat. Their firm prefers that the word not get around.

But the companies that are keeping a low profile have, it seems to me, failed to address a couple of nagging questions. Working parents spend a lot of time on the telephone arranging their lives. Business hours are generally 9 to 5. Which means that they are spending a lot of company time booking babysitters and calling service people and speaking to the teacher. What's more, employees who want creative work options have very likely had their heads in another place for months before they ever screwed up the courage to ask. And workers whose heads have been in another place are simply not going to be very productive workers. In her job as a communications consultant, Reva Nelson spends a good deal of time reading research in this area. She says that the research always shows companies that put themselves out to understand and assist employees get strong returns in loyalty and productivity. "Employers seem to think that you give and people will take. I think that if you give, people will give more in exchange. But that kind of thinking takes trust. Employers have to begin to understand what it means for a caregiver to have a mind that's at rest."

It is 2 o'clock on a warm, sunny afternoon in late May. Ellen Neeman is sitting on a bench overlooking the lake at Harbourfront. There is a slight breeze coming in off the water, cyclists are cruising by, and most of the three-piece suits in the lunchtime crowd are beginning to drift back to work. It is just the sort of day on which Ellen would like to have the option of packing it in early, throwing her kids in the car and going for a swim at her parents' pool.

It has been a long haul already, but the day is not even half over, and Ellen Neeman is tired. She is tired of schools that don't think it's their concern when she can't pick up her daughter at 3:15. She is tired of worrying about what she will do when Angella quits. She can't remember the last time she invited people for dinner, when she was able to reciprocate. She would love to work part-time, or at home sometimes, or take a sabbatical to recuperate from the crushing routine. She's been wanting to take up tennis again, maybe do some charitable work, but she knows that these are pipe dreams at the moment. She looks at her daughter and her son and hopes it will be easier for them. That they will grow up in a time when the family is no longer shunted aside, when the daycare and support systems exist sufficiently for the worlds of work and home to co-exist peacefully. She speaks of the "pathetic gains" made in the past fifteen years, and of the gains that still need to be made, but she knows there will be no easy answers: "I don't know what the answer to all of this is because it's very complicated," she says, frustration and urgency coloring her tone, "but there is one thing I do know. I know that our kids are important. I know that we need some more time with them. They're our future. Where's our future going to come from, if not from our kids?"