

A photograph of a family of four lying on a grey blanket in a grassy field. The mother is lying on her back, holding a baby. The father is lying on his side, looking at the baby. A young child is lying on their stomach next to the mother. The background shows tall grass and trees.

THE WORK MARTYR'S CHILDREN

How Kids Are Harmed by America's Lost Week

INTRODUCTION

Americans are taking less vacation than at any point in the last forty years—just 16 vacation days today, down from an average of over 20 days taken 15 years ago. America's Lost Week is wiping out vacation traditions and taking a heavy toll, particularly on children.

In Project: Time Off's latest study, *The Work Martyr's Children: How Kids Are Harmed by America's Lost Week*, kids weigh in firsthand on their parents' work habits and what it means to miss out on the quality time vacation provides. The findings are alarming and should serve as a call to action for working parents across the country.

According to American kids, parents are bringing work stress home and are not disconnecting from the office. While this harms American families today, the example parents are setting may have the unintended consequence of creating the next generation of work martyrs.

Compounding matters is America's overall vacation decline. With millions of working parents admitting that it has been more than a year since their last family vacation, kids are missing out on time with their parents that they treasure most, and the memories that come with it.

Childhood memories and family bonds should not be the collateral damage of overwork. This study's findings are a tool for parents to better understand how failing to take time off affects their children and how to make changes that will strengthen family bonds.



METHODOLOGY

GfK conducted a survey of 754 children ages 8-14 using GfK's KnowledgePanel®, a large-scale online panel based on a representative random sample of the U.S. population. Parents were screened at the outset of the survey with a set of brief questions and to obtain permission for their child to participate. The survey was conducted July 30 to August 10, 2015.

To further explore the issue, GfK conducted interviews with noted family and relationship experts. Those experts include:

[Dr. Lotte Bailyn](#): Bailyn is a published author and professor emerita at the MIT Sloan School of Management. Bailyn holds a B.A. in mathematics from Swarthmore College as well as an M.A. and a Ph.D. in social psychology from Harvard/Radcliffe. She is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association and the Association for Psychological Science.

[Dr. Gilda Carle](#): Carle is a professor emerita at New York's Mercy College. A licensed educator, Carle holds a Ph.D. in educational leadership from New York University, with a concentration in psychology, sociology, and social psychology. She is also the president of Country Cures, a non-profit organization that trains returning veterans and their families to heal their relationships.

[Michael Gurian](#): Gurian is a marriage and family counselor in private practice, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Lessons of Lifelong Intimacy* and the co-founder of [The Gurian Institute](#), a research and training organization that helps children thrive in school and in life. Gurian has served on the faculty of Gonzaga University, Eastern Washington University, and Ankara University.

PARENTS ARE BRINGING THEIR WORK STRESS HOME—AND THEIR KIDS SEE IT

Working parents may think they are shielding their children from work stress, but a commanding six in seven children report seeing their parents bring work stress home. Further, 75 percent of kids say that their parent is unable to stop working while at home.

“Overwork has all sorts of negative consequences,” said Gurian. “It’s a mental and physical stress issue, and if you have kids, it’s dangerous for them.”

Increasing evidence shows how parental stress affects children. In a study published in the [Journal of Family Psychology](#), researchers found that the more stress parents experience, the less supportive they are when responding to children’s negative emotions.¹

In addition to dealing with parental stress, kids cope with their own stress. Eight in ten children (79%) surveyed experience some degree of stress in their daily lives. The finding supports a growing body of research showing stress among children is on the rise. In fact, the American Psychiatric Association’s annual [Stress in America](#) survey found that teen stress levels top those of adults.²

Parents who want to help their kids reduce stress should consider using a vacation day. A strong 77 percent of kids report feeling no stress when their parents take time off to spend time with them.

Low-stress opportunities, like vacations, are critical to parent-child relationships. “Good relationships emerge out of simply having interactions with the people in our families under conditions that are not highly stressed,” said Bailyn.

KIDS UNDERSTAND, BUT UNDERSTANDING DOESN'T PRECLUDE HURT FEELINGS

Nearly nine in ten (86%) children say they understand when their parents’ work intrudes at home, similar to the 96 percent of adults who reported understanding their significant other’s work

intrusions in Project:Time Off's July report, [*The Work Martyr's Affair*](#).³

But children are more disappointed by those intrusions than adults. While one in three (36%) couples argue over the time needed for work versus quality time for each other, six in ten (59%) kids say they are upset when their parents prioritize work over time with them.

This disappointment does not change as children grow older. Children reported being equally upset when work interferes with their parents' ability to be there for planned events, whether the child surveyed was eight or 14.

Children's disappointment doesn't mean that they resent their parent's job—quite the opposite. “A child automatically admires a parent,” said Gurian. “A work emergency doesn't disrupt the connection—kids can think it's neat that their parent is important. But if emergencies become regular, the pattern changes and children can become resentful.”

WRITING THE FAMILY STORY

An overwhelming 82 percent of kids surveyed said they want their parents deeply involved in their lives. When looking at the intensity of involvement, one in four (24%) children said that on a 10-point scale, they wanted their parents' involvement to be at a 10. Six in ten (61%) said it should at least be at eight.

Quite simply, as Bailyn put it, “Taking time to be with children is critical.”

Nine out of ten children (89%) who are between eight and ten-years old report wanting their parents involved. That number drops slightly for 11 and 12-year-olds, to 80 percent, and to 74 percent for 13 and 14-year-olds, but still shows a strong desire for heavy parental involvement.

“Teenagers want bragging rights when they talk to their peers,” said Carle. “In this culture right now, a lot of kids are questioning

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whether or not their parents even care about them. Their ability to talk about their vacation is very important to them because it shows they have parents who care.”

Time together is particularly important for teens, as it helps them understand what Gurian calls the family story. “If we don’t give kids this time together, they’re not getting the family story,” shared Gurian. “The kids that give me the most worry are the ones moving into puberty—those years are especially sad when they don’t have a family story to tell, because their own lives are in such turmoil internally.”

Gurian added that when teen children are given that bedrock family story, it gives them a secure bond, “They will be more stable kids, they are going to have an easier adolescence—less drugs, less alcohol, less crime. That’s how visceral this is.”

KIDS SAY VACATION IS THE BEST WAY TO BOND

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Most kids (61%) want to spend quality time with parents on a vacation; time that is necessary to building a strong bond. “With children, you can’t strengthen your relationship without time,” said Bailyn.

That time helps parents understand their kids better, too. “On vacation, deep things come up, like insecurity our kids feel at school,” said Gurian. “Doing things together gives that sense of bonding and attachment that feeds the rest of the year.”

Planning the time off together can present a great opportunity to bond. “Getting kids involved is very important,” said Carle. “It’s empowering for them to get a say and to voice their opinions, and they learn that their opinion really counts.”

“Planning shows that there is a feeling of ‘jointness’ in the family,” said Bailyn. “Particularly if children are involved in the planning, it creates or reflects a well-working family structure.”

Children understand the benefits of vacation for themselves and for their parents. In their regular lives, just 19 percent say they are in a

very good mood. This number skyrockets to 60 percent when their parent takes time off from work to spend with them.

“Their moods are different and it takes a while to get them out of their shells,” Bailyn explained. “Particularly with younger children, the best relationships come when there’s enough quantity time to drive quality interactions.”

Teenagers need quality time too, but it can’t be forced. “Adolescents don’t respond very well to parents saying, ‘Now I’m here for quality time,’” said Bailyn. “The context has to be right, and that often can’t be predicted.”

Kids also feel their parents are significantly happier when they take time off to be with them. Only 14 percent of children characterize their parents’ mood as “very good” in their regular life, but when their parent takes time off work, half (50%) of kids say that their parent is in a very good mood.

FAMILIES ARE MISSING OUT ON MEMORIES

Despite its importance to children, nearly a quarter (22%) of working parents admitted that it had been more than a year since their last family vacation.

The pressures that keep working parents at the office are consistent with that of all American workers, as identified in Project:Time Off’s [Overwhelmed America](#) study: fears of “coming back to a mountain of work” (29%) and concerns “no one else can do the job” (20%) top the list.⁴

Taking just one more day off can make a difference, as the survey revealed that children notice when their parents are not at events. Fifty-nine percent of kids say their parents miss events because of work. Further, nearly six in ten (58%) children can detail the last activity their parents missed.

Project: Time Off’s *Work Martyr’s Affair* report found that the average worker missed 3.3 events per year because of work. Most frequently, those events were kids’ activities (35%) like awards ceremonies or sports. Missed events also included vacations

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[24%), family in-town visiting (22%), and even major life events like funerals (10%). An 11-year-old boy in New Jersey shared that his “dad missed Christmas last year because he had to work.”⁵

Working parents are missing these events even though four in ten (39%) have unused vacation time available. Simply using one more day can help parents attend events they are otherwise missing, something 85 percent of American workers feel they are able to do.

MAKING THE GRADE WITH KIDS

The children surveyed were asked to grade their working parents on how good a job they do when it comes to spending quality time with their kids. A strong 46 percent of kids gave their parents an “A” grade, far more generous than working parents are on themselves—just 28 percent gave themselves an “A.”

While children are more approving of their parents’ performance, that approval slides the more often parents miss events. Fifty-eight percent of kids who report their parents never miss activities because of work give their parents an “A.” That number slips to just 29 percent for kids who said their parents sometimes or always miss events because of work.

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Pulling up the grade does not have to be difficult. When children were asked to describe the “best or coolest thing” a parent has done with them, many of the responses were simple things: camping; trips to amusement parks, zoos, aquariums, and other attractions; and parents joining school field trips or scouting trips.

Even the backyard can be a destination. A 14-year-old girl in Arizona shared, “I know this isn’t anything grand, but the most fun I’ve had with my dad when he had time off from work was when he bought a Slip ‘n Slide from Target and we played on it.”

An 11-year-old girl in Pennsylvania summed up the sentiments of hundreds of respondents nicely; “It doesn’t matter what we’re doing, it only matters that we’re having fun.”

CONCLUSION

The findings of this report are not intended to make parents feel guilty, but rather to make them aware of what their children are feeling and not necessarily expressing. The takeaways are simple: quality time with children matters, and the easiest way to make that time is to put unused vacation days to use.


Whether time off allows for the family adventure of a lifetime or simply for parents to be at opening night of the school play, it is good for parents and children alike. Gurian summed up the benefits: “One, you will be less stressed, so you’re just going to be a better parent. Two, your kids will get all of this time with you, all this bonding and attachment, making them more stable, secure, healthy kids.”

America’s Lost Week is hurting children. Children who see their parents’ stress. Children who notice when their parents aren’t there. Children who want their parents heavily involved in their lives.

It’s time to make a change before all that is left is time for regret.

ENDNOTES

1. Nelson, Jackie, et al. "Family Stress and Parental Responses to Children's Negative Emotions: Tests of the Spillover, Crossover, and Compensatory Hypotheses." *Journal of Family Psychology*, October 23, 2009. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2855124/>.
2. Anderson, Norman, et al. (February 2014). *Stress in America: Paying With Our Health*. American Psychological Association. Accessed September 7, 2015. <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2014/stress-report.pdf>.
3. Project: Time Off, GfK. (July 2015). *The Work Martyr's Affair: How America's Lost Week Quietly Threatens Our Relationships*. Accessed September 9, 2015. <http://www.projecttimeoff.com/research/overwhelmed-america>.
4. Project: Time Off, GfK. (July 2014). *Overwhelmed America: Why Don't We Use Our Paid Time Off?*. Accessed September 9, 2015. <http://www.projecttimeoff.com/research/overwhelmed-america>.
5. Project: Time Off, GfK, *Work Martyr's Affair*.

A photograph of a family of four lying on a light-colored blanket in a lush green field. A man in a plaid shirt is holding a baby, while a woman in a dark blue shirt lies next to him. A young child is also lying on the blanket. They are surrounded by tall grass and a large tree with green leaves in the background.

Project: Time Off is an initiative supported by the U.S. Travel Association to prove the personal, business, social, and economic benefits that taking earned time off can deliver. We aim to reclaim America's Lost Week and shift culture so that using personal time off is not considered frivolous, but essential to strengthening relationships and improving personal health; a business investment with proven returns; and an economic necessity. Learn more at ProjectTimeOff.com.