



What Will Parents Vote For?

A survey by the National Parenting Association
and Offspring Magazine — MAY 2000

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ABOUT THE NATIONAL PARENTING ASSOCIATION

The National Parenting Association is working to make parenting a higher priority in our private lives and on the public agenda with a message that unites Americans and a national campaign to value, support, and strengthen parenting.

We're adding parents' voices to the national debate and finding new solutions to the problems facing today's parents — in how we organize our work lives, schools and our communities. We're laying the groundwork to spark and sustain a new social movement with solid research and fresh thinking, expertise in communications to reach parents, opinion-leaders, and the American public, and partnerships with others who care about parents, kids and America's future.

Support for the fieldwork for *What Will Parents Vote For?* Update 2000 was provided, in part, by a grant from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.

ONLINE

An online version of this Summary and Analysis and the full report including the survey instrument and complete findings can be found on the National Parenting Association web site, www.parentsunite.org. Related stories and an online version of the survey can be found at the *Offspring* Magazine web site, www.offspringmag.com.

What will parents vote for? SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

Despite an unprecedented span of prosperity and dramatic drops in crime, parents are more worried than four years ago about violence, drugs, educating their kids, instilling values and managing time demands of both family and work.

It's not that parents think government can't offer solutions ... they think no one is listening.

Political pollsters keep churning out the numbers tracking which candidate is ahead with one or another segment of the American public. Yet virtually none have thought to look at the issues that could unite a broad swath of the population because of their fundamental common concerns *as parents*. We thought it was important to understand what's on the minds of our nation's parents these days. What are their daily struggles? What do parents say would help them succeed in the challenges of raising the next generation? And do they think the politicians are paying attention?

To learn the answers, the National Parenting Association commissioned Charney Research to update our landmark 1996 research, *What Will Parents Vote For?* We surveyed a national sample of 650 parents in late January and early February 2000. What we found was that despite an unprecedented span of prosperity and dramatic drops in crime, parents are more worried than four years ago about threats of violence and drugs, educating their kids, instilling values and managing the time demands of both family and work. We also found lots of agreement among parents, with strong across-the-board support for a host of practical measures to keep guns away from kids, improve public schools, ease the time crunch and the economic burdens on young, low-income parents that make these pressures even worse for them.

While parents clearly think that government could address their concerns — four out of five say that government can do a great deal or something — less than half (46%) say that government is responding, a six-point decline since this same question was asked four years ago. And nearly two-thirds (64%) of parents now believe that public officials, “do not care much about what parents like me think” — up seven points from 1996. It's not that parents think government cannot offer solutions, it's that they think no one is listening. Political leaders would do well to heed this wake-up call.

After years of advocacy on the need for family-friendly work practices, attitudes are starting to change... but the shifts don't go nearly far enough.

Both mothers and fathers say balancing work and family is their greatest daily challenge.

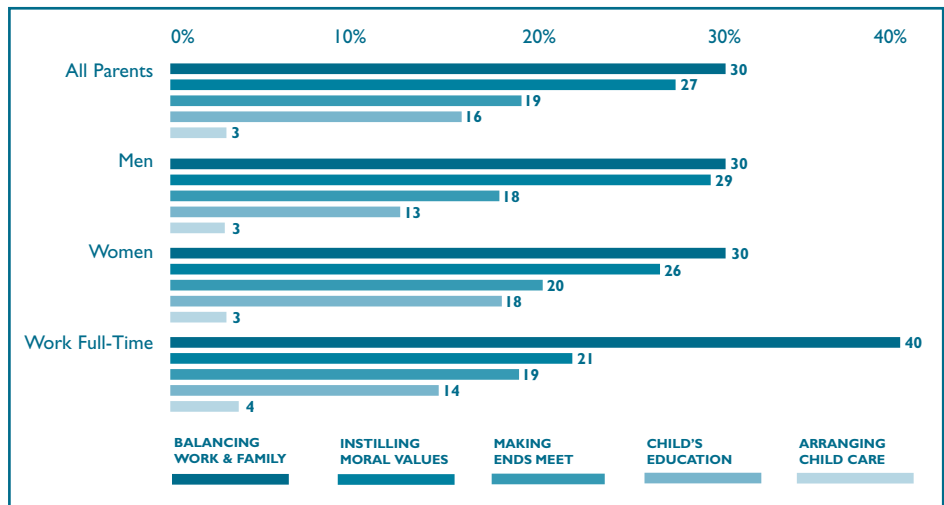
WHAT DO PARENTS WANT?

Relief from the time crunch

The good news from our survey is that employers — particularly in today's tight labor market — have begun to respond to the realities of contemporary family life. The majority of working parents now report that they have some flexibility on the job:

- sixty-nine percent of working parents say they can work fewer hours regularly if family needs require it, and
- sixty-seven percent say they can work flexible hours, for example starting earlier or later than normal working hours — and nearly half of working parents are currently doing so.

WHAT'S THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE FACING YOU AS A PARENT?



Most parents say it would not hurt their careers if they told their boss they need more time for their children, by a margin of 65% to 27% — a finding that is both surprising and heartening. After years of advocacy on the need for family-friendly work practices, attitudes are starting to change.

The bad news is that the shifts we see do not go nearly far enough or reach widely enough to solve the time crunch confronting working parents. When asked, “What is the biggest daily challenge you face as a parent?” the single most frequent response was balancing work and family. Thirty percent of parents — interestingly, the same percentage among fathers as mothers — said work-family balance was their greatest challenge. Among those working full-time, four out of

ten said so. In response to an open-ended question about their greatest worries, 19% of parents spontaneously mentioned coping with work and family and having time for their kids, up significantly from 6% four years ago.

For working parents, the lack of time for family and self is reaching crisis proportions. Moms working full-time are especially overburdened. Nearly four-fifths of them don't have enough time for themselves and almost half say they lack enough time for their kids.

WHO FEELS THE TIME CRUNCH THE MOST?

Percentage of parents who say...		Not enough time for self	Not enough time for kids
All Parents		56%	32%
Working full-time	Women	79	48
	Men	53	36
Working part-time	Women	50	30
	Men	58	35
Non-working	Women	45	17
	Men	40	14

6% of lower income parents vs. 30% of higher income parents work for firms that rate high on family friendliness.

While helpful, the transition we are beginning to see in the workplace does not reach everyone. Our data show that the folks left out tend to be lower income and younger parents — precisely those who need help the most. Thirty percent of parents with family incomes over \$60,000 a year, compared to only six percent of parents with incomes under \$20,000, work for firms that rank high on an index measuring the availability of family-friendly options. Parents under age 35, who generally have younger children, are also less likely to have on-the-job flexibility.

WHICH PARENTS HAVE WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY?

Availability of Family Friendly Work Options	Income		
	Under \$20,000	\$20,000-\$60,000	Over \$60,000
High	6%	19%	30%
Middle	32	33	38
Low	62	48	33

Apart from limited child care subsidies and the passage of the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993, the government has not done much to address the time bind squeezing today's families. The FMLA guaranteed that new parents could have 12 weeks of job-protected leave, but time off is unpaid and the law only applies to those working in firms with 50 or more employees. That means that people working for smaller firms — over half the parents in our sample — are excluded.

Work-life balance has not yet emerged as a major issue on the political landscape, so parents may not see it in those terms. But when specific public policies were proposed to them, the ideas drew broad support:

- ninety percent favor (55% strongly favor) tax incentives to encourage family-friendly policies by employers, such as benefits for part-time workers and flexible working hours, and
- eighty-four percent favor (53% strongly favor) a law to ensure 24 hours or three days paid leave annually for family needs, like parent-teacher conferences or taking kids to the doctor.

These measures were overwhelmingly favored across party affiliation, race, gender and income.

We also asked parents their views on whether new mothers should be allowed to collect unemployment benefits while on maternity leave, an idea recently put forward by the Clinton administration. Proposed regulations would allow states to use the unemployment system to offer paid leave to working parents following the birth or adoption of a child. Even when presented with the opposing argument that this could draw down reserves that might be needed in times of recession, parents favored the idea by a margin of five to three (54% to 34%).

Parents would like to see this and other workplace practices adopted that would give them more time with their families. Three out of four parents (78%) favor letting workers take time off rather than extra pay for overtime and being able to trade in ten days pay for ten days additional leave (76%).

These findings suggest that if candidates articulated ideas to combat the family time famine, they could be rewarded with widespread enthusiasm among potential voters. Our survey found that major strides have been made in making job hours less rigid. But such steps alone are unlikely to solve the magnitude of the time dilemma facing working parents. Despite the reported prevalence of flexible

hours, parents still say balancing work and family is their biggest daily challenge. It will take more fundamental changes to reorganize our lives of paid work so that we can give the unpaid job of parenting — a vital social investment — the attention it deserves.

Worries about crime and violence top parents' concerns. Nearly 7 out of 10 parents worry that a school shooting could happen near them.

Action to combat gun violence

Worries about crime and violence continue to top the list of parents' concerns and have intensified since four years ago. Forty percent of parents cite crime and violence as a major worry, up from 30% in 1996. The highly publicized wave of deadly school shootings is undoubtedly weighing on parents' minds. Nearly seven out of ten parents (69%) told us they are worried that a school shooting, like the one at Columbine High School in Colorado, could happen at a school near them. Concern is deep and widespread: at least two-thirds of parents in every demographic group and region fear that such a shooting could take place locally.

PARENTS SUPPORT TOUGHER GUN CONTROL

	Percent in Favor				
	All Parents	Women	Men	Gun Owners	Non-Owners
Legislation requiring gun makers and sellers to install trigger locks or safety devices to make it harder for kids to fire them.	88%	92%	85%	82%	92%
Registering all guns and licensing all owners, as is done with cars.	84	88	80	68	93
Raising the age of possession for handguns and assault weapons to 21.*	82	85	79	75	87

*Federal law only bans private ownership of all assault weapons and ammunition clips with over ten rounds made after September 13, 1994.

Parents do not sidestep their responsibility. Over half (53%) put most of the blame for school violence on “parents’ failure to teach and watch their kids.” One in five thinks violent TV, movies, and computers are the most to blame, and 14% point to kids’ access to guns. However, while parents may not see access to guns as the prime cause of youth violence, they certainly see restricting access to guns as an important solution to the problem. Parents — including the 32% who own guns — overwhelmingly support legislation requiring trigger locks, gun registration and raising the age for gun possession. Just over half of parents (51%) would ban handguns altogether.

Once again, support cuts across party lines *when we look at parents' views*. All three measures were favored by at least eight out of ten parents, whether they identified themselves as Democrats, Republicans or Independents. Tougher gun control is another issue that unites parents from all backgrounds, income levels and regions.

WHAT SHOULD BE THE NEXT PRESIDENT'S TOP PRIORITY?

Parents saying...

Improving public schools	29%
Health insurance for all	17
Tax cuts	16
Strengthening moral values	16
Gun control	12
Family-friendly workplaces	5
Restricting abortion	3

Parents say the next President's top priority should be improving public schools.

Better schools

The schooling of their children is a paramount concern for parents. Many aspects of education absorb their attention: quality, school hours, meeting the costs of preschool and college, and, now tragically, safety. When asked what should be the next President's top priority, the most frequent answer by a sizable margin was "improving public schools." This was the case despite the fact that, historically, public schools have been primarily a local, not a federal responsibility. Whether or not they make this distinction, it may be that parents are so dissatisfied and frustrated with the quality of education that they just want someone, somewhere, to fix the schools.

The specific measures that we asked about that drew the widest across-the-board support included:

- federal funds for school construction and renovation, favored by 85% of parents (strongly favored by 51%), and
- extending public education to include pre-kindergarten or early childhood education for all children, with 81% in favor (strongly favored by 49%).

Though two-thirds of parents would like to see schools kept open longer hours to better match the work day, this proposal is somewhat less popular than it was four years ago. And parents are divided on whether the school year should be lengthened by a month, with 44% in favor and 49% opposed. Taken together with other findings from our survey, it suggests that given a choice between keeping kids in school more or cutting back their own work hours, many parents would prefer the latter.

Economic means to provide their children with essentials

While only 16% of parents thought a general tax cut should be the President's top priority, we found substantial support for targeted tax breaks, particularly aimed at helping parents afford to provide their children with a good education, health insurance and other basic needs:

- eighty-nine percent favor (56% strongly favor) increasing tax deductions or credits to help more families pay for higher education
- eighty-eight percent favor (63% strongly favor) health insurance for every child, with a full or partial government subsidy to parents who can't afford it
- eighty-seven percent favor (59% strongly favor) eliminating state and local sales taxes on kids' necessities like diapers, school materials, and car seats.

The great majority of parents — 86% — agree that the minimum wage should be raised so that all full-time workers are above the poverty level. Support for this idea unifies parents; it gets high levels of support from African-Americans, whites and Hispanics. Not surprisingly, 98% of those at the lowest end of the income ladder favor raising the minimum wage, but the proposal was also supported by 91% of middle-income parents, and 78% of those earning over \$60,000 a year. Raising the minimum wage to lift families out of poverty enjoys greater support among Democrats (90%), and Independents (89%), than among Republicans (76%), but all favor it by substantial margins.

What are the political implications?

The outcome of what's shaping up as a tight race for the Presidency and control of Congress is likely to be determined by the ability to attract crucial swing voters among the nation's 63 million parents. With that in mind, we looked at where parents in this pivotal group stand on the issues. "Swing voters" — defined as people who called themselves either independents, "weak" Democrats or "weak" Republicans — comprised 58% of our sample.

Like parents in general, swing voters most often say that their toughest daily challenge is balancing work and family. What sets them apart is the salience of two issues: violence and schools. Swing voters are even more worried about violence than those squarely in either the Democratic or Republican camps. Not

CAPTURING THE SWING VOTE

Percent Who Say...	All Parents	“Swing Voters”	Strong Democrats	Strong Republicans
Biggest daily challenge is balancing work and family	30%	31%	30%	30%
Biggest worry is violence	40	43	33	36
Next President’s top priority should be				
Improving public schools	29	33	24	22
Cutting taxes	16	15	20	20

surprisingly, they favor tougher gun control. Swing voters are also significantly more likely to say that improving public schools should be the next President’s top priority. They voice strong support for proposals to provide federal dollars for rebuilding schools, universal early childhood education, and tax deductions to help pay college costs. Parents, and particularly those in the center with their votes up for grabs, are saying here are the problems we want addressed: the time crunch, gun violence and educating our kids.

COULD THIS BE AN AGENDA FOR A PARENTS’ MOVEMENT?

Parenthood is a powerful common denominator. In our research, we found striking and far-reaching agreement among parents on what we need to do to improve the outcomes for their children — and our future. Support for measures like these would help parents in practical ways. And it would do something more. It would say that we, as a society, value the importance of the work of parenting.

Ruth A. Wooden, *President*

Nancy Rankin, *Director of Research and Programs*

HOW THE SURVEY WAS CONDUCTED

What Will Parents Vote For? Update 2000 was conducted for the National Parenting Association from January 26 to February 8, 2000 by Charney Research, a New York-based polling firm. It consisted of a total of 650 telephone interviews, divided among a national random sample of 500 American parents and oversamples of 50 black parents, 50 Latino parents, and 50 parents who were welfare recipients. All respondents were American citizens 18 or older with children who were living at home or as their dependents. The margin of sampling error for the national sample is +/-4.5%.

The oversamples were conducted to provide sub-samples large enough to allow comparison of separate findings concerning African-Americans, Hispanics, and welfare beneficiaries. The oversamples are weighted down to their correct proportions of the national population in the data on all parents.

The sample structure is similar to that of the 1996 survey of American parents conducted for the National Parenting Association, except in one respect. The 1996 parents poll excluded welfare recipients, who then made up 5% of parents. They currently make up 3% of parents. Since they are so few, even if welfare recipients are excluded from the 2000 data, none of the national results change by more than one percentage point. Hence the 2000 findings, although they include welfare recipients, are comparable to the 1996 results.

This summary is based on the work of Craig Charney and Joan Zacharias of Charney Research, and Nancy Rankin, Ruth Wooden, and Peggy Shiller of the National Parenting Association.

"When it comes to how to help kids, who better to ask than the folks who care about children the most — their parents? This important new survey by the National Parenting Association and *Offspring Magazine* reveals a striking consensus among parents on what should be done to help them better address the needs of their children. All of us who care deeply about making sure kids are pointed in the right direction need to listen carefully to these voices."

General Colin L. Powell, *America's Promise*

"Employers will want to listen to what parents have to say if they want to hire and keep the best workers. It's encouraging to see that corporate America is waking up to employee needs for flexibility. Now it's time for work-life balance to become the norm in businesses large and small."

Carolyn Buck Luce, *National Director, Ernst & Young*

"The research shows there's more that unites parents than divides them. When it comes to their kids, parents are in agreement about what's important: they want better schools, less violence and more time for their families."

John A. Buehrens, *President, Unitarian Universalist Association*

"I especially urge candidates of both parties to give these findings serious attention."

John Mack Carter, *The Hearst Corporation*

"The National Parenting Association has done a real service in listening to the voices of parents and their major concerns."

Ellen Galinsky, *author of Ask the Children, and President, Families and Work Institute*

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