Orchestration of Work and Play Within Families

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Key Words: human activities and occupations • qualitative method

Objectives. Parental occupations within families include parents' participation in household work and in play with their children. This study explored the nature of parents' play with their preschool-aged children and how it was orchestrated within their daily occupations.

Method. Participant observations and intensive interviews were conducted with 10 families with preschool-aged children. Data were analyzed with a grounded theory approach.

Results. Parents used two types of strategies to orchestrate work and play in their families: Strategies of segregation resulted in play interspersed with household work, and strategies of inclusion resulted in play embedded in household work.

Conclusion. This study identified the process of occupational scaffolding through which parents foster their children's competence as adults; the need for deconstruction of the notion of work and play as separate experiences; and new ideas to guide occupational therapy practice with parents who are juggling paid work, household work, and time with their children.

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It has been important to provide a vocabulary that allows women in particular, but also men whose lives do not follow the model of a successful career that our society has developed, to value their achievements. To see it holistically, to see that the composing of a life, the combining of the elements, the balancing and harmonizing of them, is in itself an art form. (Bateson, 1996, pp. 9-10)

While talking about women's ability to adapt to fluidity and discontinuity within their lives, as a consequence of the physical rhythms of reproduction and maturation, Bateson (1989) referred to the act of composing a life as a work in progress. The composition of a life is a process through which one puts together a mosaic of occupations that resolves competing demands for one's attention and time. This metaphor of composing a life resonates with the focus of occupational science on the human capacity to select and orchestrate occupations throughout the life span. Occupations are defined as personally, socially, and culturally meaningful activities in which people actively participate (Clark et al., 1991; Yerxa et al., 1989). People create their daily experiences through planning, choosing, arranging, and engaging in occupations. As time goes on, their daily occupations are placed within the frameworks of their lives and the context of their personal life histories and goals (Carlson & Dunlea, 1995; Clark, 1993; Yerxa et al., 1989).

Occupational science seeks to explicate the nature of occupations and how they are orchestrated into the daily lives of people and their families (Primeau, Clark, & Pierce, 1989; Yerxa et al., 1989). Parental occupations within families include parents' participation in household work and in play with their children. Thus, parental work and play occupations might include preparing meals, cleaning the house, washing the car, cutting the grass, reading books with their children, going to the park, playing games together, and watching television.

Play between parents and their children as it occurs within their homes has been given little attention in the research literature (Cohen, 1987; Giddings & Halverson, 1981). What does parent–child play look like? What types of parent–child play occur within families? Equally important are questions about how parent–child play is incorporated into families' daily lives. Where does parent–child play fit into the daily routines of housework and child care? How do parents coordinate their children's play with their own occupations, particularly their participation in household work? Power and Parke (1982) found that parents tend to facilitate their infants' exploration of the physical environment more frequently while engaged in housework than while engaged in caregiving, individual or joint leisure, or play sessions. The
importance of housework to mothers has been related to their interactions with their children (Olson, 1981). Mothers with high measures of housework importance, compared with mothers with low measures of housework importance, were less responsive to their children while doing housework, were more restrictive of their children’s behavior, and spent less leisure time with their children.

Young children generally do not instinctively or independently plan a daily itinerary of occupations. Parents must orchestrate their children’s occupations as well as their own (Primeau et al., 1989). In the course of composing their own lives, how do parents also manage to compose their children’s lives? Bateson (1996) suggested that mothers may coordinate their daily occupations with those of their children by engaging in various tasks in an enfolded manner. Consider the case of a mother who is talking on the telephone while simultaneously checking on dinner as it simmers on the stove and keeping a watchful eye on her child playing in the next room. She must be able to divide her attention in a manner that allows her to move smoothly back and forth among these tasks (Bateson, 1989).

This study was designed to explore the nature of parent–child play and its orchestration within the daily occupations of families. Previous studies have examined either household work or parent–child play within families, but rarely have they studied both phenomena together, and certainly not with a specific focus on their occupational natures. The ways in which mothers and fathers juggle their time spent in paid work, in unpaid work within the home, and with their children may illuminate how work and play occupations affect the experiences of health and life satisfaction of family members. Knowledge of how these occupations are orchestrated can be used by occupational therapists to guide their practice with families.

Method

Selection and Description of Families

The families who participated in this study were selected on the basis of three criteria: (a) parents’ similarity to the researcher’s race and ethnic background as an English-speaking Caucasian in order to minimize the effects of the researcher on data collection and to maximize credibility, (b) parents of lower middle-class and working-class backgrounds, as determined by job classification (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992), because the majority of studies of parent–child play within the literature were conducted with middle-class and upper-class families, and (c) presence of two parents within the family. The 10 families selected consisted of a mother, a father, and a first-born child of preschool age. Some families had younger children, but parent–child play with the preschool-aged child was of specific interest to this study.

All families lived within the Los Angeles metropolitan area. The mothers’ ages ranged from 24 to 39 years ($M = 31$ years), and the fathers’ ages ranged from 25 to 42 years ($M = 32$ years). Twelve children between 2 years and 5 years, 3 months, were included in the study. Two families had two children between 2 and 5 years of age. In those cases, data were collected on both children. Five families had another child under 2 years of age. The majority of parents worked in technical, sales, or administrative support jobs, such as executive secretary, real estate sales, or computer technician. The remaining parents held jobs in either service industries, such as child care worker or deputy sheriff, or trades, such as baker or painting contractor.

Procedure

This study used the qualitative research methods of participant observation and intensive interview. Forty-six participant observations, totaling more than 109 hr, were conducted within 9 families. No observations were conducted in the 10th family because of time constraints. Each family was observed four to six times in their homes during evening meals and bedtime routines as well as during relatively less structured time on the weekends or other days off from paid work. Parents were encouraged to go about their daily business as much as possible, given that there was an observer in their midst. Both parents were seen together with their child or children, and each parent was seen alone with the child or children at least once. The total observation time in each family’s home ranged from 8.5 hr to 16.5 hr. Immediately after each home visit, extensive field notes were written, including methodological notes on the ways in which the observer’s physical presence and participation and personal thoughts and feelings may have affected the data.

One to 4 months after completion of the participant observations, interviews were conducted with each parent separately, using an interview guide. Because no observations were scheduled for the 10th family, the parents were interviewed during the first two visits to their home. The interview guide was revised during the course of the study based on data that were collected in both participant observations and earlier interviews. Parents were asked about how their children played alone and with others, how they played with their children, any beliefs they had about play, their daily routines of play and work, how they divided household work with their partner, whether they themselves played, and how they defined play. A total of 20 interviews were conducted, and 43.5 hr of interview data were collected. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Field notes of observa-
Data Analysis

Data were triangulated across data sources (mothers, fathers, and children from the 10 families within the study); across the methods used (participant observation, intensive interview); across time (families were seen 3–8 times within a range of 2–25 months); and across units of analysis (observations were made of each parent alone with the child or children and both parents together with the child or children). Data triangulation in this manner increases a study's credibility and validity (Gilgun, 1992).

Field notes and interview transcripts were organized with a word processing program and were entered into a computer qualitative analysis database (Sommerlund, 1989). Emergent coding categories were identified and further developed through testing in the field. The data were analyzed with the grounded theory procedures of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Findings

The parents used two different types of strategies to include time and play with their children in their daily routines and occupations: (a) strategies of segregation and (b) strategies of inclusion. Strategies of segregation were used when parents segregated themselves from their children's play or segregated their children from them while they were engaged in work occupations. Strategies of inclusion occurred when parents played with their children while engaged in household work activities or allowed their children to participate in the work tasks with them. David and Katie, the parents in the following excerpt, demonstrated the use of these strategies:

Kristin was playing with her two dolls. She sat each one of them in turn in the beauty salon chair and pretended to cut and fix their hair. It was actually Katie who did most of the verbalization around Kristin's play. She was sitting on the couch while she breast-fed Meg [Kristin's sister]. She would say, "Oh, are you cutting their hair?" and "Shouldn't you brush it out now?" and "Did you wash their hair in the sink already?" David was sitting next to Kristin on the floor, but he was not really interacting with her to the extent that Katie was. He was listening to the football game as he folded the diapers. At one point, Kristin asked him if he was going to play dolls with her. He said that he was folding the diapers and that he would play with her when he was done with them.

In this scenario, both parents were engaged in household work occupations. The father was folding clean cloth diapers, a laundry and clothing care task, while listening attentively to the football game on the radio. The mother was feeding the baby, a child care task. Their 4-year-old daughter was playing with her dolls. David segregated his participation in household work from his play with Kristin. Katie participated in Kristin's play at the same time as she provided child care to the baby. Both parents enjoyed football and were listening to the game on the radio, but Katie managed to enfold all three occupations—feeding the baby, listening to the football game, and playing with Kristin—while David enfolded only two—folding the diapers and listening to the football game. Bateson (1996) stated that women are more likely than men to enfold occupations by participating in more than one occupation simultaneously. Here, both Katie and David were engaged in enfolded occupations, but David segregated his participation in his occupations from his play with his daughter.

In this example, David illustrates a strategy of segregation. Although in physical proximity to Kristin, he limited his involvement in her play while he was engaged in a work task. Before beginning this work task, David and Kristin had played at length on the computer. After completing his work task, David returned to rough and tumble and imaginary play with her. Katie demonstrates the use of a strategy of inclusion. Although physically farther away from Kristin than David, she was more actively involved in Kristin's play while she breast-fed the baby.

Strategies of segregation result in parent-child play interspersed with household work. Strategies of inclusion are manifested as parent-child play embedded in household work.

Play Interspersed With Household Work

Nine mothers and six fathers used strategies of segregation while engaged in household work. The parents frequently talked about the process of interspersing time and play with their children among their other household responsibilities. Peggy explained this process:

I decide when it's time for me to stop [playing because] I have to go clean or something or do something...I know everything else I have to do, so I'm thinking, "I've got to do this" while I'm playing with them...I'll break it up here and there.

Fathers also talked about interspersing work with play. Paul, said:

If I have to work around the house, I tend to be focused on what I'm doing. I'll have to vacuum or do the dishes, that's just what I'm doing...I might be playing with [the kids] and, all of a sudden, I'll think, "Oh, I got to vacuum." And I'll just grab the vacuum and vacuum. And then I might go back and play with them some more.

Mike described how he managed to segregate his daughter, Jennifer, from his housework tasks:

Sometimes you have to break the play time off for me to get something done, like folding the clothes, or doing the dishes, or something like that. It's something that has to be done...I'd maybe set her up with a videotape or something like that and go do it and then go back...I make sure she's occupied with something and then take care of it.
Several parents referred to their setting up things for their children to do while they worked, such as watching videotapes or television. They also talked about taking advantage of times when their children were already engaged in independent play in order to do housework. Parents' use of strategies of segregation to intersperse time and play among their household work tasks resulted in a routine of work and play occupations that occurred sequentially throughout the day.

Parents who participated in paid work with a conventional Monday-through-Friday, days-with-weekends-off schedule were almost unanimous in stating that weekday mornings were the least likely times for play and interaction with their children and that weekday evenings and weekend days were the most likely times. Two mothers who were home on weekdays agreed that early mornings were the least likely times for play but that late mornings and early afternoons were the most likely times. Fathers who worked shifts or weekends found that their times to play varied with their shifts. One father who worked in real estate sales had more time in the weekday mornings but was frequently unavailable on weekend days.

Parent–child play occurred more frequently than suggested by the data on strategies of segregation. In a discussion of the difficulties inherent in measuring the time involved in mothering work, Ruddick (1995) stated that mothers frequently engage in their household work while simultaneously caring for or supervising their children. She believed that a frequent dilemma arises for mothers when they stop their work to play with their children; that is, they are no longer working and their work is left undone. Their participation in household work and in play with their children conflicts. Although this conflict may occur when strategies of segregation are used, this was not the case when parents used strategies of inclusion to create opportunities for parent–child play embedded in household work.

Play Embedded in Household Work

Strategies of inclusion were manifested as play embedded in household work. In the following excerpt, a mother, Kim, demonstrates how strategies of inclusion may be used:

Kim was across the kitchen by the silverware drawer. She folded two napkins in half and gave them to Julia [her daughter]. She told her to put them on the placemats. While Julia was doing this, Kim told her, “Come get the spoons.” Julia repeated to herself, “Get the spoons.” She set the napkins on the table next to the placemats. By the time Julia had finished with the napkins, Kim had two spoons and two forks out for her. Julia took them back to the table and set them on the napkins. She took a minute to make sure that she had a fork and spoon with each napkin.... When she seemed to be satisfied with what she had done, she walked back over to Kim. Kim picked her up, pulled her close, and gave her a hug. She leaned back against the cupboard still holding Julia and playfully asked her, “Can I have a lunch-is-almost-ready kiss?” Julia giggled and said no. Kim asked, “Can I have a we-played-outside kiss?” Julia shook her head no. Kim asked, “Can I have a Christian’s-watching-a-movie kiss?” Julia said no. Kim continued, “Can I have a Mommy-loves-you kiss?” Again, Julia refused her, giggling as she did so. Finally, Kim pulled Julia close and kissed her anyway.

Two different strategies of inclusion are illustrated in this passage from the field notes. Kim was preparing lunch for her 5-year-old son, Christian, and her 2-year-old daughter, Julia. Christian was watching a videotape in the living room, and Julia was with her mother in the kitchen. Kim involved Julia in the work of setting the table for their lunch. This is an example of scaffolded play within household work. After they had completed the task of setting the table and while waiting for their lunch to finish cooking, Kim, who was still involved in the work of meal preparation, took the opportunity to participate in a moment of cuddly, affectionate play with her daughter. This is an example of parental participation in play within household work. All the mothers and fathers in the study combined play with their child and household work through the use of at least one of these strategies of inclusion. In fact, when asked how they played or what were their favorite things to do with their children, all the mothers and half the fathers provided examples of play embedded in household work. This process of embedding play within household work resulted in their engagement in enfolded occupations (Bateson, 1996).

Parental participation in play within household work. All the parents participated in this type of play. It occurred more often while the parents were engaged in the care of their children, but I also observed it during their completion of housework. They frequently participated in play with their children while working in order to proactively manage their children's behaviors. Dawn spoke of how she participated in play with her 2-year-old daughter while doing the grocery shopping:

I try to make the grocery store fun for her....I’ll push the cart really fast down the aisle, and I jump on it with her....She holds bags for me. We throw the apples in it. We’ll sing, “One apple, two apples, three apples.” She goes, “Me four.” Four’s her big number. So we throw another apple in. Usually she holds on to the sides [of the cart] and I’ll push it. She goes, “Faster, Mommy, faster!” So we go around the corners really quick. That’s all. Just trying to make the grocery store fun.

Carol and Paul described their different experiences of grocery shopping with their children. Paul usually took his 3-year-old son and 1-year-old daughter grocery shopping with him, but he said that there was no play during their trip to the store “because I don’t like him to be out of my sight in stores, so I try to not make it drag out longer than it has to so that he doesn’t get really
antsy or bored.” During her interview, Carol said:

If we’re going to the store, I’ll play hide and seek with Greg and stuff and Daddy’s really good about checking off the list. If Daddy’s there, then I really feel like I can cut loose… and I really do try to be playful.

Carol’s and Paul’s experiences of play within the work of grocery shopping differed not only from each other, but also from Dawn’s experience with her daughter. Paul used a strategy of segregation to separate play with Greg from the work of shopping. There was no play during his trips to the store. Although Carol participated in play with Greg while grocery shopping, it was also segregated because she left the actual work of the shopping to Paul. Dawn’s experience at the grocery store, however, involved play with her daughter that was embedded in the real work of moving through the store and picking up the items that they were going to buy. Dawn used a strategy of inclusion to participate in play with Jennifer while she actively engaged in a work occupation. Carol’s play with Greg was separate from the work being done by Paul.

A mother of a 6-month-old son and a 3-year-old daughter articulated how play embedded in the work of caring for her son expanded her opportunities to play with her daughter:

Even though I’m doing a chore, I’m doing fun things with them at the same time, so Bridget knows I’m not ignoring her… I’m trying to change Richard’s diaper or something, but she’s in there, and I’ll have one of Richard’s toys, and I’m playing with her at the same time I’m changing his diaper.

Parents participated in play within a variety of child care occupations more frequently than within household work occupations. Their ability to do so actually increased the opportunities and capacities to play with their children. Spontaneous play frequently erupted in the context of child care. The following excerpt demonstrates how Carol’s creative play transformed the work of getting Greg ready for bed into a playful interaction:

Carol picked up the hairbrush and brushed Greg’s hair. After brushing it for a minute or so, she pulled on both of his earlobes one after the other and then pushed the ear flaps forward simultaneously in rhythm with her vocalizations of “Doo! Doo! Duh!”… Greg giggled loudly.

Sometimes, play embedded in many of the physical caregiving occupations seemed to have a facilitative purpose. Parental participation in children’s play seemed to be a way of accomplishing the work inherent in the child care tasks. Dawn participated in what seemed familiar play sequence with Jennifer to ensure that her teeth were properly brushed. First, Dawn allowed Jennifer to brush her teeth independently. Then, as Jennifer resisted Dawn’s request to brush her teeth, Dawn brought play into the interaction:

As Jennifer started to protest, Dawn said, “Yeah, come on. There’s bugs in there. Let Mommy get the bugs out of your mouth. There’s a big moth in there. Let me get it.” Jennifer gave her the toothbrush. Dawn brushed Jennifer’s teeth, keeping up a steady chatter as she worked: “Is he up here? What about down here? Is the moth down here?”

Dawn’s participation in play embedded in the work of taking care of her daughter served the purpose of completing the work in a playful manner. Jennifer’s initial resistance was overcome with the introduction of play. As Jennifer was successful in gaining her cooperation and in accomplishing the task at hand. Parental participation in play within household work occurred when play with their children was incorporated into the work. The parents also incorporated their children’s play into household work in the form of scaffolded play within household work.

Scaffolded play within household work. When parents involved their children in household work occupations, scaffolded play often occurred. All 10 mothers and 8 fathers either demonstrated scaffolded play within household work during their visits to their homes or talked about it during their interviews. Within the context of parent–child play, parents and children jointly managed the children’s development and learning through shared participation in daily household work occupations. The term scaffolded play refers to the ways in which parents actively structure an adult occupation so that their children can participate in it as independently as possible. The parents’ modifications of the occupation in the form of verbal or physical guidance or completion of difficult steps while allowing their children to complete other, simpler steps act as a scaffold upon which the children are able to perform the task to the best of their abilities (Bruner, 1985; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). I have called this process of allowing children to have the access and freedom to participate in scaffolded play within household work occupational scaffolding.

One of the first examples of scaffolded play within household work observed occurred between Brent and his two children, Riley, a 4-year-old boy, and Laura, a 2-year-old girl. Brent was engaging in yard work and caring for the children in the front yard while his wife, Peggy, was inside, cleaning the house:

Brent picked up a lawn edger, a long-handled, mechanical tool that trims the edge of the lawn. He took it and ran it along the grass at the edge of the driveway. Riley immediately asked, “Can I do it, Daddy? Can I do it?”… When Brent was finished with it, he gave the lawn edger to Riley who began to edge the lawn along the curb of the street. Brent got the hedge trimmers out and began to clip the hedges… After a couple of minutes, Laura got off of her tricycle and went over to Riley. She wanted to try the lawn edger too. Riley reluctantly gave Laura the edger… She tried to imitate Riley, but was having difficulty. When Riley asked for the lawn edger back, Laura gave it to him and then ran over to Brent, asking him to let
her do what he was doing. Brent said, “Okay, but I’ll have to help you.” He put his hands over hers on the hedge clippers and helped her to cut off parts of the hedge. He would point out to her what part they were going to trim, then he would direct her hands over to that spot, and help her clip it. Riley, after watching this, asked for a chance to trim the hedge too. He told his dad that he didn’t need help; he knew how to do it. Brent just pointed out the parts for him to trim, and Riley cut them off.

In this scenario, Brent adjusted the level of scaffolding to match the abilities of his children. When helping Laura trim the hedge, Brent used a combination of verbal directions, hands-on physical guidance of her hands on the hedge clippers, and physical movement of her hands to where he wanted her to clip the hedge. When Riley took his turn at trimming the hedge, Brent decreased the level of scaffolding by using only verbal direction to guide Riley’s independent use of the clippers. Brent’s willingness to allow the children to have access to the lawn edger and the freedom to use it independently demonstrates another aspect of occupational scaffolding, which is giving children the freedom to interact with objects that are not toys.

Monique talked about the process of relinquishing control over her 3-year-old daughter’s actions while engaged in scaffolded play and its consequences when they were making cookies together:

> It was so funny because you don’t think when you [use] an expression, and I said, “Ok, now throw the butter in there.” Well, she threw the butter and I had to laugh at myself because I thought, “Well, I said throw the butter.”...She took it literally; she threw the butter in....The flour went flying...on both of us and I couldn’t get mad. It was my fault because I said “throw it.” So I thought, “Well, I’ve got to really watch when I say something like that.”

In this example, Monique transferred the responsibility for the physical action of putting the butter into the mixing bowl to her daughter, Bridget, but retained the responsibility for her failure to provide adequate scaffolding that would have prevented Bridget’s mistake of throwing the butter.

When parents used strategies of inclusion to merge time and play with their children, scaffolded play within household work often occurred. Inclusion of children in household work occupations expanded parents’ opportunities to interact, spend time, and play with them. One father explained how he and his wife used strategies of inclusion to maximize the time they could spend with their son:

> Michael is just going to get as much time as we can give when it’s available. And what time isn’t available to him to do one-on-one will be the time for everything else. We’ll bring him into whatever else needs to be done. If I’m working on the car, I’ll let him crawl under the car with me. Yes, I’ll make sure there’s an extra jack stand under the car, and I will tell him not to grab the hot exhaust pipe. But am I going to stop him from crawling underneath? No.

Parents’ engagement in scaffolded play within household work had two advantages. First, it increased parents’ time and play with their children by embedding play in their work. Second, parents provided occupational scaffolding, which extended their children’s learning and ability to participate in occupations that will become a part of their future daily lives.

**Implications for Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy**

The findings have many implications for the fields of occupational science and occupational therapy. Three points will be discussed: (a) occupational scaffolding, (b) deconstruction of work and play within adult occupations, and (c) guidance for working with families.

**Occupational Scaffolding**

Occupational scaffolding may be a process through which parents foster their children’s competence as adults. Although childhood occupations are believed to shape adulthood accomplishments and achievements, little is known about how this occurs (Clark et al., 1991; Primeau et al., 1989; Yerxa et al., 1989). The families in this study differed in their use of occupational scaffolding. Some parents allowed their children to have more access to and freedom to interact with objects that were not toys than did others. Additionally, some parents more readily relinquished absolute control over their household work and transferred some of the responsibility for its completion to their children than did others. These differences between families led me to speculate that occupational scaffolding is more likely to occur under some conditions than others.

Further examination of one of these conditions revealed that some parents did not actively interact in or directly scaffold their children’s play, but they still facilitated their children’s engagement in pretend play by allowing them to interact with objects that were not toys. In one case, a father allowed his 4-year-old son and 2-year-old daughter to play with some tools in his tool box. They crawled under the car parked in the front driveway and pretended to be “fixing” it. Beyond placing a block of wood behind the car’s front tire to ensure that it was safely parked and remained immobile, the father did not participate in his children’s play. In another case, a mother, while preparing dinner, allowed her son to play with a plastic glass, water, grated parmesan cheese, and the microwave as he “pretended” to make something to eat. Her participation in his play was minimal.

Nevertheless, I believe that both of these parents were involved in the process of occupational scaffolding. Their willingness to allow their children to play with objects
that were not toys, but were objects used in the course of participation in adult occupations, extended the children’s ability to learn about those same occupations. The parents’ use of the natural environment to facilitate their children’s participation in occupations is similar to an occupational therapist’s use of the environment to promote a client’s therapeutic involvement in occupation. Given that childhood occupations are thought to shape adulthood accomplishment, this process of occupational scaffolding may hold a key to how parents foster their children’s competence as adults. Moreover, occupational scaffolding may provide insight into occupational therapists’ clinical reasoning process while working with clients. Further research designed to examine occupational scaffolding and the conditions under which it naturally occurs within parent–child play at home and in occupational therapy practice might enhance our understanding of the nature of humans as occupational beings.

**Deconstruction of Work and Play Within Adult Occupations**

The parents described play embedded in household work as a blending of work and play experiences. One mother described her experience of scaffolded play within household work in the following way:

> It’s one of my ways to do my daily routine. I wouldn’t really classify, well, yeah, I would, because the whole routine is work, but it’s kind of play–work.... It’s both for me.... It’s my way to get things done in a fun way. So, yeah, I’m working. No, vacuuming the house isn’t exactly what I want to do right now... but I’m getting it done, and we’re all enjoying it at the same time.

This finding is not new; researchers have previously discussed the combined experience of work and play in household work (Berk & Berk, 1979; DeVault, 1991; Primeau, 1996b; Shaw, 1988). Nevertheless, occupational therapists have traditionally based their clinical practices on the assumption of a healthy balance of work, rest, and play, but it remains an assumption in light of the lack of a detailed understanding of what constitutes work, play, and their healthy balance (Clark et al., 1991; Primeau, 1996a). Using the parents’ experience of the blending of work and play in scaffolded play within household work as a springboard, future research could deconstruct the notion of work and play as separate experiences within adult lives. Deconstruction of this dichotomy is critical to our understanding of how engagement in a daily round of occupations contributes to a person’s health and life satisfaction (Clark et al., 1991; Primeau, 1996a).

**Guidance for Working With Families**

Occupational therapists can use these findings to guide their practice with families with preschool-aged children (Parham & Primeau, 1997). Parents call on different strategies to interact, spend time, and play with their children. Therapists can use this knowledge in a variety of ways with parents who are juggling paid work, household work, and time with their children. When one thinks about parent–child play within families, one typically thinks of what I have called play interspersed with household work. Parents are thought to use strategies of segregation in order to set time aside (i.e., separate from their participation in household work) to play with their children. Yet, many parents who are involved in both paid and unpaid work may not have time each day to make this separation, or, as this study indicates, some parents may not organize play with their children in this segregated manner.

When occupational therapists recognize that there are many different ways for parents to play with their children, they can provide information to parents about variations in parent–child play and how it can be orchestrated with household work. Specifically, they can share information about how to engage children in both play interspersed with and play embedded in household work. Some parents may already be embedding play in their household work but may not recognize it as play.

Other parents may require assistance as they explore how to expand their opportunities to play with their children through play embedded in household work. Occupational therapists’ expertise in matching the interests and abilities of children with or without special needs to specific household work occupations will be essential in this exploration process. In addition, they will need to collect information about parents’ occupations, how these occupations are organized throughout the day, and which of them are familiar. Because play embedded within household work, particularly scaffolded play within household work, tends to occur in occupations that are familiar, occupational therapists working with families must consider parents’ daily routines. This process of evaluating and facilitating the fit of children’s interests and abilities with specific household work occupations that are familiar and routine to parents will lead to occupational therapy interventions solidly based in family work and play occupations. Therapists who recognize the family environment and who gather and incorporate information about that environment into their intervention plans may discover new ways to work with families.

**Summary**

This qualitative study described the play of mothers and fathers with their preschool-aged children as it occurred within the context of daily occupations of families. Participant observation and intensive interview data col-
lected from 10 families revealed that parents used two
types of strategies to orchestrate work and play within
their families: Strategies of segregation resulted in par-
ent–child play interspersed with household work, and
strategies of inclusion resulted in play embedded in
household work, specifically parental participation in play
within household work and scaffolded play within house-
hold work. The findings have the potential to contribute
to both theory development and clinical practice in occu-
pational science and occupational therapy.

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