

programming for two-earner families

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Two-earner families now represent a majority lifestyle in the United States, composed of slightly more than 50% of all husband-wife families.¹ Factors contributing to the phenomenal growth of this lifestyle include the expansion of the services sector of the economy, a shorter work week, the increased educational level of women, a lower fertility rate, more day care facilities, and less social pressure against wives being employed outside the home.²

Yet, perhaps the most important contributor is the effect of inflation on family income. A second income is rapidly becoming a necessity for families who hope to provide children with a college education, buy and furnish a home, take a yearly vacation, and care for an aged parent or grandparent.

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Today, as never before, the desires of both husband and wife influence decisions about spending the family income, dividing household responsibilities and caring for children. Extension has acknowledged these changes in family structure and functioning and has tried to plan programs that meet the needs of two-earner families.³ Since the traditional audience for Extension programs in home economics has been women, the remainder of this article is directed toward them with the acknowledgment that future programs need to encourage the participation of men.

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Diary Survey
Program Topics

A recent source of information for Extension personnel searching for ways to reach women in two-earner families is the diary survey of Wisconsin and Illinois employed women.⁴ Women responding to this survey indicated they need programs that include information on their legal rights, time management, assertiveness training, coping with guilt and family pressures, job skills, health care, child care, and nutrition.

Information Sources

When asked to rank their use of information sources, a majority of employed women in the study indicated that popular magazines were their first or second choice for information. Newspapers (a medium often used by Extension), television, and radio were also popular sources of information. However, bulletins and pamphlets, the usual format for Extension publications, weren't ranked among the top three information sources on any subject.

Media

To capitalize on the knowledge provided by the survey, expanded use of television and radio seems appropriate. In this respect, timing appears to be a crucial element in reaching an audience of employed women. Programming should be aired at times when they're able to tune in. These times include early morning, noon, and evening hours. Media that can be used at the convenience of the user would also be appropriate. These media include learn-at-home courses, articles in the local newspaper, magazine articles, and books written by state specialists and federal staff.⁵

Virginia's Methods

In the past two years, the Virginia Cooperative Extension Service has used a variety of methods to meet the informational needs of employed women and their families. Although not listed in the Wisconsin and Illinois study as a source of information, the group meeting has been effective. In contrast to the typical weekday meeting, Saturday mornings appear convenient for occasional meetings. Occasional meetings, planned by three Extension units and co-sponsored with other organizations such as the American Business Women's Association were well-attended.

Saturday mornings are an alternative to weekday meetings that conflict with employment responsibilities. Evenings may already be overscheduled with meal preparation and other household tasks, participation in community programs, and activities with the children and husband.

Three Virginia Extension units held Saturday morning seminars for employed women in 1981. The topics, chosen for their relevance to the needs of employed women, attract-

ed between 75 and 150 women each time. Topics varied, but usually included a discussion of conflicting family and employment responsibilities, coping with the problems associated with accepting new roles and changing old ones, child care, the value of the woman's contribution to family income, time management, nutrition, and health care. According to program evaluations, the seminars contributed to the participant's feelings of self-worth about her choice of combining employment and family life.

Agent Support

The remainder of the methods used in Virginia in 1981 to meet the programming needs of two-earner families were directed to Virginia family resources Extension agents. The February, 1981, issue of the newsletter, "News and Views," addressed a number of topics relating to the two-earner lifestyle. The newsletter had two purposes. First, it was an update for the agents' personal use. Second, it provided information for the agents' programming efforts.

Agent In-Service Training

A number of family resources agents indicated a need for additional information to meet requests for information from clientele and to meet their own personal needs as members of two-earner families. To meet these expressed needs, a committee of Extension specialists from Virginia Tech and Virginia State University planned a three-day, in-service educational session for Extension agents. Specialists and teaching faculty from all subject-matter areas of family resources presented the program.

Information was presented on the importance of a woman's income to family well-being, recognizing and resolving family problems related to dual employment, division of household responsibilities, and improving family communications. The use of time was a common concern in several sessions. Topics covered included making time for oneself, the importance of leisure time activities, and coping strategies for reducing time conflicts. Also included were sessions on family housing, the clothing needs of professionals, and planning quick and nutritious meals.

Learn-at-Home Course

At the end of the series of meetings, a panel of specialists discussed effective methods of working with two-earner families. They also reviewed the findings of the Wisconsin and Illinois study⁶ and summarized the results of programs planned and implemented in Virginia. Of special importance to the agents was the introduction of the new, multidisciplinary, learn-at-home course, "The Working Family: Managing at Home." The course was well-received and the first 6 lessons were pilot tested with 290 women in 5

Virginia Extension units during the spring of 1982. The average completion rate was over 50%, ranging from 40% to 100%.

As a result of the pilot testing, three new lessons were written and included in the final course. Nine lessons are available in 1983.⁷ Clientele may "custom design" their own course, choosing at least six lessons appropriate to their own needs. In their 1983 Plan of Work, 25 Virginia Extension units indicated plans to use "The Working Family" course.

Summary

Programming for the needs of two-earner families will continue. The various media and programming strategies in use will be evaluated for effectiveness so that future educational efforts can be directed for increased audience exposure and success. One problem already noted and of increasing concern is how to attract both husbands and wives to future meetings. A common remark by wives after meetings was they wished their husband had attended.

There is no single overall audience for family-related Extension programming. Now, more than ever before, Extension must direct family programming at audience segments, each representing different types of families and lifestyles. The Virginia efforts at reaching two-earner families with appropriate educational information is an example of the type of Extension programming needed in the 1980s.

Footnotes

1. Howard Hayghe, "Husbands and Wives as Earners: An Analysis of Family Data," *Monthly Labor Review*, CIV (February, 1981), 46-53.
2. S. Rawlings, "Perspectives on American Husbands and Wives," Series P-23, No. 77 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978).
3. Paul D. Warner and James A. Christenson, "Who Is Extension Serving?" *Journal of Extension*, XIX (March/April, 1981), 22-28.
4. Helen Leslie Stevens and Lloyd R. Bostian, "Diary and Questionnaire Survey of Wisconsin and Illinois Women: Procedures, Descriptive Results and Recommendations for Extension" (Madison: The University of Wisconsin-Extension, 1980).
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. The nine lessons in the learn-at-home course, "The Working Family," are: (1) Management: To Reach Goals; (2) Time Management: Work Smarter, Not Harder; (3) Household Responsibilities: Working as a Team; (4) Child Care: Making Every Minute Count; (5) Home Repair: Can You Do It Yourself? (6) Feeding Your Family: Managing Meal Preparation; (7) Feeding Your Family: Cutting Back on Sugar; (8) Clothing Decisions: Sharpen Your Buying Skills; and (9) Two-Earner Families: Earning and Managing Two Incomes.