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Working parents find it's a balancing act

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By 5 a.m., Jim Francese is out of bed.

That's funny in and of itself. At his alma mater, Connecticut College in New London, Francese, 33, now an English teacher at Stonington High School, often stayed up studying until 4 a.m.

But now Jim is a father, and free-floating bedtimes are a thing of the past. Now he's up before dawn to jump into the shower, rush downstairs to put tea on, then back upstairs to dress for his job.

By that time, his wife of eight

years, Madelene Francese, 32, manager of annual giving at Newington Children's Hospital, is stirring, as is their 2½-year-old son, Eliot.

Madelene will have time with Eliot on the drive from their East Haddam home to Trinity College Community Child Center in Hartford. She drives it because her work is closer than Jim's. So mornings are Jim's time with their son. He prepares breakfast, all the while chatting with Eliot, and then they'll pop in a videotape.

This is a concession on Jim and Madelene's part. They don't like to hand Eliot over to the television, but it seems to calm him down for the 50-minute drive.

That, and the drive, bother Jim. "This kid commutes!" said Jim. "Two hours a day, no way around it. One thing I also hate is he knows when the weekends are. That's not right. He's too young to know that."

The pressures on working parents — and employees in general — have created a mini-industry of authors and speakers who are divided into two camps: One camp tells employees how to pack more activity into their days; another tells everyone to slow down.

One of the foremost members of the latter group is Bloomfield native Jeff Davidson, author of 1991's "Breathing Space: Living & Working at a Comfortable Pace in a Speed-up Society" (MasterMedia, \$10.95), which was recently translated to Korean and Japanese.

"A lot of times time-management people come in and tell us how to cram more into a day, and then there are stress reduction speakers who say, 'Go to the mountains, breathe deeply, and visit the guru.'" Davidson said. "Nobody is really addressing the reality of their existence."

Davidson advocates mini-breaks, 10 single minutes scattered throughout the day when an employee just sits quietly.

"This isn't slowing down," he said. "This is being prudent."

Another way to be prudent, said Davidson, is to make a priority list. Much of our pressure is self-inflicted, he said.

"We've grown up in a society that tells us we need to keep up," Davidson said. "Meanwhile, subscriptions are piling up, television shows are extending later into the night. Why do people watch this stuff when they need sleep?"