

# PARLOR PROFILES

DAIRY FAMILIES TALK ABOUT THEIR LIVES

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## The Study Overall

The Zumbro River Cluster (in the four southeastern Minnesota counties of Goodhue, Wabasha, Dodge and Olmsted) is dairy country. It boasts about 1,150 dairy herds, which generate approximately \$123 million in annual income (1994 statistics, Minnesota Dept. of Agriculture). That number is slightly more than one-third of the cluster's total agricultural income.

But dairy farming is much more than numbers in ledgers (or, these days, numbers on computer spreadsheets). Dairying provides a living for the many families who manage dairy farms. More important, it's their way of life. There's also one aspect of dairy farming that's unique, something even other farmers don't share—the extra time commitment dairy farms require. In dairy country, the cows must be milked every day—no matter what.

### A Study Is Born

To learn what impact this central fact about dairy farming has on the way family members relate to each other and how they participate in their communities, and to discover what dairy families think about their lives, a team of five Minnesota

Extension Service educators created the Zumbro River Cluster Dairy Research Project.

In the hope of finding ways to help dairy families find more satisfaction in their lives and be more successful, the team interviewed members of dairy families from each of the cluster's four counties. Research questions centered on:

- how they felt about dairy farming;
- what they identified as sources of stress in their lives;
- how they deal with those stresses.

Whenever possible, husbands and wives and other adult family members involved in the dairy operation were interviewed separately, using the same or similar questions. Those interviewed were chosen randomly. Thirty people, from 17 farms, shared their insights about their unique lifestyle. In the next few years, it is hoped that the information they provided will lead to programs that will not only benefit dairy farm families in the Zumbro River Cluster and elsewhere, but also prove helpful to other farm families.

### That's Farming

The families identified a number of things in their lives that caused stress, but despite this, nearly every family with children agreed there was one thing they liked about living on the farm: raising their families in an atmosphere they liked. It was also interesting that many of those interviewed took the heavy workload, the twice-a-day milking commitment and all their other problems in stride. Several of the items the researchers identified as probable sources of stress weren't always perceived as such by the farm families. The typical response? "That's farming."

### Pluses and Minuses

The interviews revealed several things that family members liked about dairy farming, plus quite a few areas that could cause stress.

Many dairy farmers expressed feeling very close to their cows. No doubt this is because the farmers spend so much time in close contact with their herd every day. Many people cited the independence they feel and the lifestyle as two desirable attributes of farming in general.

Dairy families also identified several issues that trouble them.

### Issues Identified

- ✓ lack of time to spend with family members
- ✓ finances
- ✓ total workload, including seasonal pressures, long days, and preoccupation with the farm
- ✓ difficulty finding adequate child care
- ✓ the role of older children on the farm
- ✓ the roles of spouses on the farm
- ✓ managing employees
- ✓ multigenerational families living or working on the farm

### Strategies to Strengthen Families

Each of the twelve *Parlor Profiles* summary sheets include a section called "Strategies to Strengthen Families." The strategies are suggestions from the research team, and are based on their interviews with families in the study, what they know from other research about child and family development and farm business issues, and work experience.

These strategies are intended to give families a starting point for discussion or action on issues of concern to them.

## A Few Conclusions

- Families reported lower levels of stress than expected.
- Dairy farm families express a strong acceptance of their lifestyle; even when they report a variety of stressors.
- The identity of the farmer and spouse is tied closely to the farm.
- The farm business and family relationships are very closely intertwined.
- Dairy farm families have a unique relationship with their cows.
- When more than one generation is involved, it is often a source of stress and conflict (e.g., expansions, vacations.).
- Finances (or the lack of adequate finances) was expressed as a significant source of stress by dairy farm families.
- With few exceptions, women are solely responsible for the homemaking and child care responsibilities. Often the responsibilities are in addition to large farm responsibilities or off-farm employment.
- Many spouses have off-farm employment. Families reported varying levels of stress resulting from this employment.
- Quality, dependable, labor is very hard to find.
- Dairy farmers work a tremendous number of hours resulting in exhaustion and little time for marital relationships and parenting roles.
- Families feel a lack of control over issues such as time and finances.
- Families did not express use of several recommended business practices in managing farming operations (goal setting, asset transfer, employee evaluation, long-range financial planning).

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## Rewards of Dairy Farming

The job of a dairy farmer offers rewards not available outside farming—some that even other farmers can't claim. For most dairy farmers, being around cows, getting instant rewards and feedback—along with where and how they do their work—makes their job special.

### **Bonds Are Built**

The close relationship dairy farmers develop with their cows is a real plus for most. Many in the study talked about this special bond. One farmer, who called his cows "the girls," showed that the strength of this bond can sometimes lead to a loss of perspective. "On the farm, I'm married to those girls first and she (his wife) comes second. That doesn't go over real well," he said.

The relationship farmers have with their cows is almost human, no doubt partly because the cows are usually the farm's main enterprise. As one farmer said, "I guess a guy just kind of takes the parts that he likes the best in dairy farming and does the best he can. If you like your

cows, take care of them and they'll take care of you."

The rewards of breeding and showing cattle was another thing a number of dairy farm couples liked. In addition to being around the animals, there was the added bonus that the whole family could be involved in groups such as 4-H, FFA and breeding organizations.

### **Farm Life Is Gratifying**

Another dairy farming plus, identified primarily by husbands, is the gratification that comes from working on a farm. One farmer put it this way: "You see a cow have a calf. The calf grows and has a calf. You plant a seed, it turns into a crop. The changing of the seasons. There's the closeness that you feel toward God and just with the life."

One wife identified another benefit that seems unique to dairy farming—the instant reward and feedback. "When you get the milk, you get an instant reward," she said. "If you screw up, they (the cows) are going to tell you with that next

milk check or the next milking. You get instant feedback that tells you whether you are doing a good job or not. In a lot of jobs, you don't get any feedback."

*"You are your own boss, that's the best part of it."*

### **Time Management Is up to You**

Couples said they liked dairy farming because they could be their own bosses and have some control over how they used their time. Many felt good about being able to do what they wanted when and how they wanted—at least some of the time.

"You are your own boss, that is the best part of it," noted one farmer. "One reason I didn't go into the dairy buyout was because I didn't want to work for somebody else. I'm used to being my own boss. If it rains and I don't feel like working, as

soon as I finish the work that has to be done, I can loaf. If I had a job someplace else, I probably wouldn't be here talking to you today because I'd have to be there working."

### Keep Life on Track

While families liked the variety of tasks on the farm, they also

appreciated dairy farming's habits and routines. They thought that having to milk the cows twice every day provided some stability to life. One farmer said, "I'm a creature of habit. When my routine is screwed up, it throws me off. If I plan to do such and such a thing today and I get half-done and it's all wrong, my whole day is screwed up."

### No Commuting to Job

Where they worked was another reward dairy couples talked about, because it meant they could avoid the daily hassle of commuting to a job in traffic and didn't have to punch a time clock. It also meant they could enjoy the peace of the farm.

## Strategies to Strengthen Families

- Make a list of all the things you like about dairy farming. Refer to it when you feel overwhelmed.
- It's good to enjoy working with your cows, but keep things in perspective. Your relationships with your spouse and family are more important. They need time and nurturing, too.
- Take advantage of available resources that provide advice on how to balance work and family.

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## Profile of a Dairy Farmer

The typical dairy farmer is a person with a strong work ethic, a positive outlook, and a close relationship with his cows. He's also someone who likes being his own boss. Some, however, are perfectionists, and their need to do everything correctly or a certain way takes time away from their families and can cause them extra stress.

### Strong Work Ethic

"You have to be passionate about your work," one husband pronounced. With a comment like that, it's not surprising that eight families in the study talked about the need for a strong work ethic and dedication to the profession. The families take a lot of pride in their work and are willing to put in extra labor to make it a success. But some noted that there was really little choice. "We know the farm comes first and we just don't plan any extras," one husband said.

Spouses appear to accept or support the need for a strong work ethic. But sometimes it takes an off-farm job for them to understand their husbands' commitment to the farm. "I was

a lot more understanding after I went back to work," admitted one wife, "because I got involved in my job and realized what it was like to be dedicated to something. I hadn't seen that before."

### You Can't Have Tails in Your Face and Hate it

Dairy farmers have a close relationship with their cows, which the farmers clearly see as a plus. Since the cows are the major part of their business and farmers spend a lot of time with their animals, this is hardly surprising. Some farmers' attachment to their cows is very strong. Five husbands used the terms "love" or "like" to describe their relationship with their animals. "I just love the cattle," said one husband. "I just try to keep them all healthy."

Some farmers may identify with their cows too closely, however, if one husband's response to the question, "What would you do if you sold the cows?" is any indication. "I don't know," he replied. "I'd probably end up in a mental institution."

Most wives understood their husbands' relationship with their cows. And at least one shared it. "As I was washing the bulk tank, my friend's husband asked me if I like this and I said I did. He asked what I liked about it and I said, I liked everything. You're regimented to the day's routine. You milk the cows, you have to make sure they are happy and fed, comfortable and healthy." One husband summed it up best when he said, "You can't go out there and have 50 tails in your face and hate it. You have to love the profession, you have to love the way of the life—and you have to love everything about it."

### Take Life in Stride

Most dairy farm families in the study seemed to have a positive outlook on life. Their attitude was: take life in stride and don't let the stresses and little things overshadow the rewards of dairy farming. People tended to get self-satisfaction from their work. Some expressed a matter-of-fact approach to life, typified by this response. "Everybody talks about stress, stress, stress. To me, I think it is a bunch of you

know what. I don't believe in it. It was there years ago just like it is now. I figure it is part of the game. These problems are here and that is part of the job of farming, the way I look at it. I mean, if you can't handle whatever, go find somebody who will help you cope with it. You are not going to get away

from it, so you might as well learn to work with it."

### **Being Your Own Boss**

Dairy farmers valued the freedom to be their own boss, to make their own choices. "You're your own boss," one maintained. "If I want to take the afternoon off, all I have to do is finish up

my chores and I can go do what I want. That's what I like." Another said, "The best part is being able to do what you want when you want. That is what I like about dairy farming. Nobody there telling you that you should be doing this or that."

### **A Farmer Knows Best**

A few dairy farmers admitted to being perfectionists about their work. As one husband said, "I've got to do the work and only I can do the work or only I can do the work best." This characteristic seems to serve farmers well, but isn't always a positive for their families. That's because it takes him away from the family too much and can lead to stress for everyone. One husband's comment shows wives can be perfectionists, too, "Well, I guess we like to see that things get done perfectly or exactly every time, and they (the children) maybe don't."

## **Strategies to Strengthen Families**

- Celebrate the strength of being your own boss. Take the day off! Come in late! Take a nap!
- Make sure the people on your farm (including your family) are as important as your cows. Take the time to talk to your family and employees and express your appreciation for their contributions.

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## Rewards of the Farming Lifestyle

Dairy families clearly feel their life-style offers something nonfarm life can't match—the opportunity to live, work and play together. It's why they value their lifestyle so highly. While acknowledging that crop or other livestock farms offer this option too, dairy families see raising and milking cows as something unique.

### Lifestyle Has Rewards

In addition to being around animals (cows and pets), half the families in this study mentioned specific aspects they liked about their lifestyle. These included a positive environment for raising a family, living in the country, the ability to take a few hours off during "normal" work hours (between 9 and 5), and the ability to blend work and family so easily.

### Let's Just Leave

Even though it's hard to get away for long periods of time, being able to leave on a whim or for an afternoon is definitely seen as an advantage by dairy families. "Just two days ago," said one wife, "I said, 'Let's go visit some friends. We have to get out of here for awhile.' He said, 'You can't leave.' I said

'Well, we just have to get away. Let's just leave.' So we visited some friends for an afternoon. Like all dairy farmers know, that's the best you can do to get away most of the time. But sometimes that is enough, just going to a movie is sometimes enough. Just to leave it and begin again the next day."

### Living in the Country

More than half the families interviewed mentioned living in the country as a benefit. Privacy and open spaces were important to them. These two comments by husbands show the strong convictions many have about country living. "I could not handle living in the city," said one. "I just couldn't do that. It was nice in college when I had my buddies to do something with all the time, but it's different now." When asked about selling the cows, one husband responded, "It would be awful hard for me. It would be like jail to me in town. I like the wide open spaces out here."

### A Good Family Place

Both husbands and wives see living on a dairy farm as a great opportunity to teach their children responsibility, a strong

work ethic, and healthy goals and values. They especially like the fact that they can do this through hands-on experiences, not just words.

One husband is looking forward to showing his young daughter what a farm has to offer. "I like the idea of working with my family, both my wife and my dad, and I think that as my daughter gets older, we'll appreciate that a lot more. With both of us fully employed here, we'll be able to watch her grow up on the farm and help her experience things that we probably wouldn't have if we were employed off the farm."

### Blending Work and Family

Nearly every family saw the unique opportunity to blend work and family as one of dairy farming's great rewards. There were several aspects to this blend that were mentioned.

### Working with Spouses

Couples placed a high value on working together. Four husbands, whose wives worked off the farm, identified this as sharing their accomplishments with their partners. Others really liked working directly with their spouses, and saw the sharing of

work and personal life as a great source of strength in their marriages. One husband, whose wife is an equal partner in their dairy operations, expressed his appreciation of their partnership this way. "If we quit dairy and got other jobs," he explained, "I know I would miss working with her and making decisions and planning with her. That wouldn't happen unless we went into a business where we worked together."

Working together with her husband, according to one

woman, despite their financial challenges, enhances their relationship. "We don't want things to change," she remarked. "We expect things to evolve, but we are together and we plan to be together forever. We'll do what we can to make that happen. That is definitely our strength."

### **Being Together**

One wife liked the fact that her family could work and play together. "(The greatest reward) is to have everybody involved," she said. "When we work in the summer we will do a lot of

things together around the yard. Then we will get the pool out." One spouse suggested that attitude plays an important role in whether a dairy farm is a good place to raise children. "I don't know if living on a dairy farm is the ideal place to raise kids—it probably isn't," she admits. "I think it depends on whether you think your kids are hired hands or whether you think your kids are just a part of the family."

Some couples thought they spent more time with their children than nonfarm parents. They also liked the fact that their children had the chance to interact with other generations, especially grandparents who live or work on the farm.

## **Strategies to Strengthen Families**

- Take advantage of the flexibility of working on a farm. Schedule special times to spend with your family.
- Take vacations. Explore creative options for low-cost get-aways.
- Let your child(ren) choose an activity to do with you periodically.

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## Work Overload

*“And he’s just working, working, working, working...”*

This comment by a wife captures how families perceive the sometimes crushing workload dairy farmers face. The resulting exhaustion and stress are left unstated, but they’re obviously part of the equation. Work overload was so common that more than half of the families in the study specifically mentioned it.

Men and women alike said they wondered sometimes why they stuck with dairy farming when it took so much out of them. One spouse said: “There are times when you just plain get tired of the hassle and he gets disgusted and he’s frustrated and you ask, ‘Why are we doing it?’” One man’s opinion—“just don’t like the hours anymore”—would no doubt be shared by many.

This statement from one farmer, complete with sarcasm, seems a good summary of the situation dairy farmers face, “If you enjoy working independently, if you like

putting in 40 hours more every week than any other man, if you want these extra problems and you know there’s nobody to come in, and you want to deal with them, it’s a hell of a good deal.”

### Family Time Suffers

Couples had two major concerns about farmers’ work overload, both relating to their families and both showing that the quality of life in dairy families suffers because of that workload.

The first is that all the time spent working takes away quality time they could have with their children. Even when parents do have an hour to read to their children or do something with them, the parents often can’t keep their eyes open to do it. The other concern is a lack of time as a couple.

The work overload problem increases when field work is added to an already hectic schedule. Of course, field work is an issue for all farmers. But in addition to field work, dairy farmers must continue to milk

the cows twice, and even three times a day, everyday—no matter what.

It doesn’t seem unusual for dairy farmers to work several days with little sleep during field season. Interestingly, both husbands and wives seem to accept that a heavy workload and exhaustion are part of life on a dairy farm, and they believe there’s not much anyone can do about it.

*“There are times when you just plain get tired of the hassle and he gets disgusted and he’s frustrated and you ask, ‘Why are we doing it?’”*

### The Work Comes First

Work overload comes with one other *benefit*. Farmers are so preoccupied with the cows and the farm work and the business that they rarely stop thinking about them.

This farmer's wife probably wouldn't be overjoyed to hear what her husband said, but his comment reflects the size of his workload. "I guess what would

be our biggest disagreement is that she says that I'm always concentrating on the farming," he said. "So much that I don't realize she's around here some days."

Another husband also realizes that the workload is a problem, but his response—which was typical—shows that he doesn't think he can do much about it. "The farming comes first," he said, "and that doesn't go over real good. She's had to deal with that. And she's not real happy about it."

## Strategies to Strengthen Families

- Consider different ways of doing your work. If you see the way you're doing things as the only possible way, it will be nearly impossible to make changes.
- Examine your attitude about your workload. If you resign yourself to situations you don't like, they'll never improve.
- Be sure you leave enough time every day for sleep. Get in the habit of not letting anything interfere with this.
- Ask industry people—sales representatives, feed consultants, etc.—to make appointments instead of dropping in and interrupting your routine. Set aside a regular block of time during the day for appointments. Set aside certain times—family times—when you absolutely won't set up appointments.
- Consult dairy management specialists about how to manage your workload better.
- Make your family and your health a very high priority. A life of constant stress, lack of appropriate self-care, and a lack of attention to relationships can have detrimental health effects.

One farmer suggested eliminating field work by using rotational grazing. "All you're worrying about is getting the grass to grow," he said. "Then you put the cows on it, move them across it, keep rotating it and keep it fresh, and you get rid of a lot of stress."

The men know they are preoccupied with the farm and that they have a hard time getting away from it mentally. They also know that their wives don't like this very much, but the men don't seem to think things can change. Because farmers see few options to change the demands the farm makes on their time, wives appear to feel they are the ones who must adapt.

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## Couple Time

### Never Enough Time

Time—most families feel they never have enough. On a dairy farm, that perception is magnified because one constraint never goes away—the cows must be milked at consistent times and intervals every day. In such a situation, carving out time to spend as a couple or away from the farm is a real challenge.

Of the 17 families interviewed for this study, each mentioned some concern about being able to take time off. At least the husband or wife of 12 (80%) couples had some concerns about the amount of time they spent with their spouses.

Husbands expressed as much frustration, if not more, as wives about not being able to spend time together and not being able to work on developing a quality relationship. The husbands were more specific, mentioning concerns like divorce, something they feared might happen to them if they didn't work harder to find more couple time. But finding time is difficult.

Only a few couples would even venture to guess how much non-work time they actually spent with their spouses in an average week. "Not counting in bed I don't remember whether I spend any time with her," one husband stated.

Wives had similar responses. "I have a lot more kids time than I actually have spouse time," said one. "We have not spent any time alone probably all summer. I think my husband and I both feel that a lot of times we just need to catch up some."

*"Not too many people end up having to pay somebody so they can have a vacation."*

### Finding Time Together During the Day

Twelve couples gave specific examples of how they spend their time together. Eight mentioned ways they regularly spend time with each other. The most common example, reported by seven couples, was during meals.

"We usually try to have a little time for breakfast," said one husband. "It is our time to relax and take about 1 1/2 hours and kind of get ready for the rest of the day." One couple spends time together during morning milking. "All we have to do is put milkers on, so we sit here and have a little hot chocolate," the wife said. "We usually sit about a half hour." In both cases, the regular time together came out of the work day and wasn't away from the farm.

### Just a Walk in the Woods

Eight couples (53%) mentioned specific examples when they had recently spent at least a night away from the farm. One husband was tuned into what relaxed his wife. "We kept our beef cows over on the other place," he explained. "Every night we would just go over, because they were all in the woods, and then we'd walk out there. She said that was most enjoyable, that walk in the woods." One wife illustrated her frustration about the whole subject of time away from the farm when she said she would

like “to have the freedom that, if you go to a wedding, maybe you could stay for the whole thing instead of hurrying home.”

### Many Related Reasons

Sixteen families were frustrated about not being able to take vacations. The reasons cited were lack of money for hired help and an inability to trust others to do the job.

Fourteen families (82%) felt the lack of hired help significantly affected their ability to take much time off. One wife said, “You can’t do that (take vacations) with dairy unless you have a full-time hired man or someone who can step in and do it.” Six families mentioned a lack of finances to hire the help. “Not too many people end up having to pay somebody so they can have a vacation,” one wife said.

### Trusting Others

Five families spoke of the difficulty they had in letting go of their responsibilities and trusting others with their farm work, even for short periods of time. One husband’s comments illustrate this: “I don’t care to leave the cows in someone else’s care,” he stated, “because there are so many things that need to be done a certain way.” Wives shared this concern. “Sometimes the stress of worrying about (how the help is doing) counteracts the relaxation,” one woman noted. “Because I guess we figure we can’t hire anybody good enough to do what we are doing.”

## Strategies to Strengthen Families

- Consider time with your spouse as an investment in both your family and your business.
- Discuss budgeting money for hired help periodically so you can spend time with your spouse away from the farm.
- Consider creating a cooperative arrangement with neighbors to care for each other’s cows so families can get away periodically
- Recognize that others may not be supportive of the priority you place on your family.
- Make an effort to relax when you are away from the farm, and trust that the people you have left in charge can handle things.

## Barriers to Spending Time with Spouses

- Lack of hired help
- Limited financial resources
- Inability to let others handle farm responsibilities

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was right. "I'm very content here," she remarked. "I tell the story about the first time I was on our place with my husband before we were married. Chore time came and he said, 'I'll see you in a couple hours,' and I said, 'What are you talking about? I want to come out and see what it's like!' So he set up a

bale of straw in the middle of the barn and I started asking questions and I can just remember feeling, this is home, this is it."

Another wife sees her role as more supportive. "I try to have meals ready and do whatever is

expected to keep things running smoothly," she said.

And how do their relationships work when husbands and wives work together on the farm? Every wife who worked only on the farm was satisfied with her role. The only complaint was that husbands didn't participate equally in the housework.

Couples might disagree over specific issues, but none of the wives actively working on the farm expressed any negative feelings or resentment about what she did. This comment by a wife is a good summary: "We fight in the barn, but get along fine in the house! We disagree on how things should be done, but I don't think it carries over into our personal life."

## Strategies to Strengthen Families

- Discuss how family responsibilities such as child care, parenting, household maintenance, etc. can be best accomplished when both spouses are fully employed on the farm.
- Establish regular opportunities to spend time away from the farm, and focus on something completely unrelated to farming.
- Cultivate some individual interests, as well as some as a couple, that don't relate to farm work. When an individual's or family's identity is completely wrapped up in the farm, it's very hard to adjust if the farm work ends for some reason (financial problems, physical restrictions, old age, death of a spouse, divorce).

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# PARLOR PROFILES

## DAIRY FAMILIES TALK ABOUT THEIR LIVES

### The Role of Children on the Farm

#### To Work or Not to Work?

Many parents in the study relied a lot on their children for help in operating their farms. Some young children even held very responsible roles. One 10 year-old, for example, does all the evening milking for the family, while a 12-year-old in another family keeps all the barn records.

But four families had an opposing view—their children do not work at all on the farm. These parents felt that school, extracurricular activities and friends were important to their children's development at this stage in their lives. So the parents chose not to involve their children in farm work at all.

The question of whether children should do farm work faced most families. Of the 17 families in the study, 15 had children. (In three of those families, the children were infants or pre-schoolers and too young to work.)

For many of the families, it was important that the whole family be involved in the dairy

operation. Comments like, "On a dairy farm it has to be; here it takes everyone," and "Every one of us provides labor for the farm," are examples of how parents felt. In many cases, the children are just expected to work on the farm (see box) and there appears to be little negotiation about it. "They are expected to get their chores done, and with athletics, it's not always easy so it kind of falls on whoever is here. If you don't practice or play that night, it's your turn..."

#### Can They Handle It?

It's important that parents give careful consideration to their children's abilities and the developmental stage they have reached when establishing work responsibilities. Is the job you ask your child to do something that he or she is mature enough to handle? Has your child reached the stage where he or she has the skills to do a particular job or do it safely? It's just not advisable, for example, for young children to hold positions of extreme responsibility.

#### Children's Chores on the Farm

75%	feeding cows, bedding, cleaning stalls
50%	calf-care and feeding
42%	milking
33%	field work

#### Raising the Bar Too High?

Fathers whose children did work on the farm—in some cases very hard work—sometimes had negative comments about how their children performed it. There seemed to be an expectation by parents that children's work be perfect, an expectation that is not realistic, given the ages of some of the children and the fact that they are, first and foremost, students. One father said, "Well, I guess we like to see that things get done perfectly or exactly every time and I think they (the kids) maybe don't."

Many parents tend to expect their children to mirror their own experiences growing up on a farm. This comment by one

farmer, who didn't get to participate in extracurricular activities when he was young, illustrates the point: "If I wasn't working for dad, I was working for some neighbor. So I was kind of looking for somebody to be that way." This father did admit that

he wishes he had the opportunities his kids have, because he knows he may have missed a lot. His ambivalent feelings are evident when he says, "I guess I'm happy with it now. It has been tough."

## Strategies for Strengthening Families

- Consult child development guides to get an idea of what your children can handle at a particular age. Children have different skills and develop them at different rates. Chores on the farm should be matched to a child's age level and ability. If children are given jobs that are beyond their developmental ability, it can create a safety hazard.
- Remember that children aged 5 to 18 are students. They need adequate sleep and a regular time every day to do homework.
- Have a family discussion about how the children are involved in the farm, and how both parents and children feel about that.
- Recognize that children need a variety of experiences in their life for healthy growth and development, and should not be expected to work all the time.

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# PARLOR PROFILES

DAIRY FAMILIES TALK ABOUT THEIR LIVES

## Household Responsibilities

### A Woman's Work Is Never Done

Dairy farm wives have the same complaint women in the city have—when it comes to the house and children, men are mostly missing in action. The women interviewed in this study talked about their frustration at the lack of support they received from their husbands in caring for their children and maintaining their home. In every case, the women were primarily responsible for housework, cooking, child care and other homemaking tasks. There were only a few cases where the men provided any assistance at all. Even when wives were active partners on the farm, or worked full-time off the farm, they were still responsible for the house and kids.

One wife expressed her frustration this way: "He farms, that's what he does, and I work at my job and I take care of the house and I take care of the kids and I make sure everything is running around here and he farms, period. And that's probably the greatest stress for me."

### Even Babysitting Is Tough for Some Farmers

Another woman felt she just couldn't do it all. "It was real difficult last year to keep up at school (her job) and at home," she said. "I just felt we were a mess all the time."

Some husbands even find it difficult to care for their children while their wife is at her job or gone somewhere. One husband asked his wife to quit her evening job because he said it was too difficult to be in charge of his kids, even though they were in bed when she went to work, and only rarely woke up. "He doesn't ever help in the house or do anything," the woman said. "Sometimes I get a little fed up with that and jump on him about it. He's good for a week and then he starts to slack off again."

### Women Who Work on the Farm See It Differently

Clearly, the women are responsible for all aspects of running the home. A significant number aren't very happy about this situation, particularly those with off-farm jobs. Wives who did not

work off the farm seemed more content, however. "We planned it that way so I would have time with the girls," one wife explained "If it's not planting season, and if there's not a big call for something else on the farm, I have four hours with the girls, just by myself, without worrying about anything else."

The following morning schedule for one family seems chaotic, but the woman who lives it says she's content: "A typical day for us is like this: I get up at 6:00 a.m., run to the barn to do

*"He farms, that's what he does, and I work at my job and I take care of the house and I take care of the kids and I make sure everything is running around here and he farms, period."*

chores, feed cows while he milks, feed calves, run to the house to make sure the boys are up, go back down and do more chores, then get the boys off to

school. It's chores most of the day, and dinner when we get to it. Farming is what we are doing together, and we are doing it. That is how I want it to be."

## This Is the Way It Is

Some of the husbands realize they expect a lot of their wives. Most, however, didn't mention this in interviews. As with many of the other things that can cause stress, there is almost a general acceptance that "this is the way it is," even though the families don't always like it.

## Strategies to Strengthen Families

- Make a list of household responsibilities. Ask everyone in the family—husband, wife and children—to sign up for 'inside chores' on a weekly basis. Have one person each week in charge of monitoring that all chores get done, including reminding people pleasantly when the chores are not finished.
- Each day, parents should discuss what specific parenting responsibilities need to be attended to that day—and who can do them. This will help keep both partners aware of the ongoing needs of their children.
- Fathers, consider the fact that you are not just a babysitter now and then. In addition to the very demanding role of farmer, you have a very important role as a parent.
- Discuss budgeting money to hire household help periodically.

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# PARLOR PROFILES

DAIRY FAMILIES TALK ABOUT THEIR LIVES

## Off-Farm Employment

### Half of Dairy Wives Work Off Farm

If this study is an accurate indication, half of dairy farm wives work off the farm. While this doesn't seem to be a major problem—off-farm employment is another reality accepted by dairy farm families—there is still considerable stress for wives. That's because their work doesn't stop with their outside jobs and they continue to be responsible for household chores and child care. Despite this and minor inconveniences caused by working off the farm, no one reported extreme dissatisfaction with the situation.

### Most Dairy Wives Find Off-Farm Work Satisfying

Twenty-five percent of wives with off-farm jobs were professionals. The majority held clerical positions or other paraprofessional jobs, such as educational or health care assistants. All reported satisfaction working off the farm and some clearly found it fulfilling. "I went back to work to start saving money to buy a farm," one woman said, "but now I work because I like what I

do. I'm much happier than I was at home feeding calves." Another woman's identity was her job: "I'm a career woman," she stated.

### More Money Is Best Benefit

The biggest benefits of having a spouse work off the farm are financial—extra income, health insurance and other benefits. Two wives in the study worked primarily because they were committed to having a career.

One unique benefit from off-farm employment—more tolerance—is illustrated by one woman's story. "When I went back to work we both came to a better understanding of what the other person went through every day. It was a turning point that made a difference. I understood what he was, what it was like for

*"When I went back to work we both came to a better understanding of what the other person went through..."*

him to be dead-tired when he went to bed, not wanting to chat about some little thing that went on during the day. Now when I'm tired and I put my job first, he laughs and says, 'Remember when you didn't understand that?' I've changed. I've changed a lot. But we both have. We're not the same people we were 20 years ago."

### Some Concerns Arise

Off-farm employment is not completely stress-free. In addition to the double duty of an outside job and being accountable for a house and children, wives must sometimes deal with in-laws' expectations. "They didn't understand (my working)," said one woman. "They wanted a passive farm wife that just went along with everything."

A concern of husbands and wives was the separateness that can develop between spouses if they're not careful. One woman's comments show how that can happen. "He had his work and I had mine," she explained. "Pretty soon we realized we were leading separate lives."

Lack of time to get things done—whether at home, at work or on the farm—was also an important concern. One wife said, “It was either get rid of the kids, get rid of my job, or not go outside. The outside part went. And that has made things less stressful here.”

### Husbands’ Attitudes

Husbands seemed generally supportive of their wives off-farm employment, but some indicated sadness at not having

their partners beside them on the farm. “Her working off the farm meant more hours in the barn and longer days for me,” one husband said, “but it was necessary, I guess.”

“She’s gone by 7:30 a.m....,” said another, “so we don’t see each other at all during the day.”

But a third husband was less understanding. “If I had my way, I would have her home here doing nothing but carting kids and helping me.”

### Wives’ Involvement

While some of the wives who work off the farm are not involved in the farm’s operation, (except to provide their husbands with emotional support), more than half said their off-farm employment didn’t isolate them completely from the farm. They continued to stay on top of what was happening there and some looked forward to getting more involved again someday. “Even though I’m working,” one woman said, “I can still tell you which cows just freshened or what they’re milking. I’ll go back to being outside more when the kids are through school. I like being outside.”

## Strategies to Strengthen Families

- Set aside some time every day—even if it’s just a few minutes—when you can talk with your spouse about the day, your family, life in general. Set a time you can realistically stick to—with rare exceptions—every day.
- Stay informed about what your children are doing. Ask them to talk about their day at dinner or bedtime. If it’s a particularly busy season, find a way to connect with your children in some way each day, even if only for a minute or two.
- Refer to the *Household Responsibilities* Parlor Profile for ideas on how to share the inside chores.
- If off-farm employment creates tension on the part of *either* spouse, be sure to talk about it openly.

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# PARLOR PROFILES

## DAIRY FAMILIES TALK ABOUT THEIR LIVES

### Finances

#### A Major Cause of Stress

Finances, a big concern for all farm families, are a major cause of stress for dairy families. Over 88% of the families interviewed for this study discussed this issue. One woman put it bluntly. "I wake up in the morning thinking about financial problems," she maintained, "and go to bed thinking about them." One man voiced what no doubt worries many. "I have a big fear that everything I've worked for will go down the tubes," he admitted.

Here are some other telling comments:

- "Every time you talk to a banker, it gets worse and worse and worse," said one woman.
- "I'd like to see a bit more profit so I could update my machinery to lessen my work hours and avoid major breakdowns," one man said.
- "There's not much profit in farming, so you can't let things go that need to be done. But you hate to abandon your family's needs," another man noted.

*"I wake up in the morning thinking about financial problems and go to bed thinking about them."*

#### Crops

There were many areas where finances caused stress for families. Not getting crops planted and harvested in due season, coupled with price uncertainty, was most frequently mentioned. This worry may have been discussed more frequently because the majority of the interviews were completed in late 1993, following two years of poor planting and harvesting conditions.

#### Milk Prices

Milk prices were mentioned by almost half (7) of the 15 families who mentioned finances as a cause of stress. The prevailing low milk prices during the study may again have affected

families' opinions. As with their uncertainty about crop production, families feel this is something beyond their control.

#### Open Accounts

Six families discussed paying monthly bills and credit loans (open accounts) as a stress-producer. One wife reported, "I guess if there is a day that I am the hardest to work with, it's on bills day." Another wife said, "I think it's the open accounts that bother me the most."

#### Medical Insurance

One-third of the families who experienced stress over their finances brought up the cost of medical insurance. "Medical insurance has increased every time we receive a notice," one spouse said.

If dairy families are insurable, they face high premiums and deductibles. "No matter what happens," one husband complained, "when health insurance comes they want anywhere from \$200 to \$250 a month with a \$1000 deductible."

Several families rely on spouses' off-farm employment to provide their health insurance coverage.

From the number of families raising this issue (88%), it is apparent that financial concerns are one of the most significant causes of stress for dairy farm families. Worries about paying

open accounts and credit loans, losing the farm, attaining credit, milk prices, and so on, often occupy their thoughts. It appears that learning to live with and manage uncertainty about finances in a positive way is a key to a high quality of life for dairy farm families.

## Financial Causes of Stress

(in the order of frequency they were mentioned by study participants)

- Crops planted/harvested in due season
- Milk prices
- Open accounts
- Medical insurance

## Secondary Financial Causes of Stress

- Unidentified disease in dairy cattle
- Machinery breakdowns and repair costs
- Government regulations
- Poor quality feed
- Workload

## Strategies to Strengthen Families

- Talk about financial issues openly as a family.
- Work with a financial consultant or farm management specialist to complete a financial (enterprise) analysis of your farm, including balance and cash-flow sheets.
- Consider a farm record system that will provide annual comparisons and show financial growth and trends.
- Develop short-term (less than 5 years) and long-term (5-10 years) financial goals.
- Develop business relationships with lenders. Communicate frequently with them about your business, including failures as well as successes.
- Meet regularly with your business management team, consisting of your vet, banker, seed supplier, county extension educator, etc.

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# PARLOR PROFILES

DAIRY FAMILIES TALK ABOUT THEIR LIVES

## Intergenerational Relationships

### They Are the Farm

Everyone needs to feel their life has value. If someone is suddenly removed from making a meaningful contribution, he or she may feel that life no longer has much meaning. This is especially true for many farmers, who become so engrossed in their business that it becomes their identity. If they weren't farming, many have little or no idea what they would do. In most respects, they are the farm and the farm is them.

This strong lifestyle identification makes it extremely difficult for farmers, especially those with limited outside interests, to retire. It is also a significant cause of stress for the children who take over their farms. This study found that many dairy families experienced stress related to intergenerational issues.

### Not Quite Independent

Although all study participants said their farms now support only one family, 70% of them started in some kind of partnership or working agreement with a parent. Some of these working agreements remain in force, influencing farm

operation. One husband considers himself the sole proprietor of his dairy farm, for example, but he purchases all his feed from his father, who operates the land as a separate farm business. Another farmer operates his farm independently, but his father retains a pasture to raise a few beef cows.

This multigenerational aspect plays a big role in what decisions are made and how they are made. For some, the pressure is fairly constant, while others report tensions from specific situations. When asked who would be affected most if her husband had to quit dairying, one wife replied, "My husband's parents...would feel bad because they think it's really neat that their son is a dairy farmer."

### The Way We've Always Done It

Eight study families had problems with their parents while working out future business arrangements. The conflict took several forms. In some cases, farm improvements, such as barn remodeling, became sore spots.

In one case, the old barn arrangement had served a retired farmer ever since he bought his place from his parents. Unfortunately, the 40-year-old stalls were too small for today's larger cows and carrying manure out by hand had become a major labor problem. His son, who now farmed the place, had discussed the decision to remodel the barn with his father, but when the contractors showed up to start work, the older man made several comments to them that indicated the whole thing was a surprise to him.

The attitude among most of the older generation—that farm couples should devote their whole lives to the farm—was another cause of tension for the families in the study. One wife reported that a parent regularly commented that "you take more time off than we ever did." Some respondents also had problems with a parent who wanted to help and be involved, but who was no longer physically or mentally capable.

### More Involved, More Stress

Four elderly parents lived on the farm. Two other men worked on the farm every day, but no longer lived there. Parents still living on and/or involved with the farm were

probably the biggest cause of stress, according to study participants. Many farm families indicated that their parents just couldn't understand why the younger generation couldn't do everything the way they always had. This attitude applied to living in the old house (which needed repair), taking vacations or time off, or remodeling the farm.

### Intergenerational Influences

Farming is an occupation where a high percentage of owners transfer

their business to someone in their family. Farms go from one generation to the next rather than to non-family members.

Farming has a high percentage (50%) of multigenerational situations. This means three generations (or more) live and/or work on the same site.

Farming is an occupation where a young person has the opportunity to become the sole proprietor of a large-scale

business with significant assets. In such a situation, a mentor can be important.

Seek additional sources of information (available from your local Extension Office), including:

- FS-6302 Questions to Ask Before You Start Transferring the Farm Business
- FS-6303 When to Transfer the Farm
- FS-6309 Protecting the On-Farm Heirs
- FS-6310 How to Be Fair with Off-Farm Heirs
- PC-6317 Transferring the Farm (This is a series of fact sheets, including all those listed above plus several others relating to other business aspects of farm transfers.)

Specialized extension educators in financial and business management have many resources that can help families set goals and determine what is important for each family member when a farm is transferred between generations.

## Strategies to Strengthen Families

- Outline the responsibilities of all active farming partners on paper.
- Develop a plan for transition of farm responsibilities and ownership. Consider whether it may be appropriate to make these changes in stages, with a target date for complete transition.
- Cultivate interests that don't relate to farmwork. When an individual's or family's identity is completely wrapped up in the farm, it's hard to adjust if the farm work ends for some reason (financial problems, physical restrictions, death of a spouse, divorce, old age). Starting early in life to achieve a balance between farm, family and personal life can help make the transition off the farm easier.

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# PARLOR PROFILES

DAIRY FAMILIES TALK ABOUT THEIR LIVES

## Managing Hired Help

### Employees Create Stress

Whether it's work, school, finances, household chores, or relationships, modern life can mean a lot of stress for anyone and any family. Dairy farming adds another stress—managing employees. Ten families in the study listed dealing with hired labor as a significant cause of stress.

One husband described dealing with his employees this way: "I could write a book on hired help. Of all the things I do, the hired help is what bothers me the most. Some of them are a nightmare." Wives echoed their husbands. "It's always stressful for me having hired help around here," one woman said.

But many dairy farms need hired labor to accomplish work that must be done every day. And with so many farmers so engrossed in their business that it becomes their identity, hired help is essential if farmers want to spend any time with their families and away from the farm.

### Problems with Hired Help

Families mentioned the following problems with hired labor:

- Unreliability
- Lack of cow husbandry skills
- Failure to do chores in a satisfactory manner
- Alcohol problems

One woman summarized the situation this way: "We have the biggest need for a milking service

in this county you have ever seen—we need qualified people."

In addition to the stress employees caused once they were hired, families said the process of hiring, training, and maintaining labor on dairy farms created additional anxiety.

Part of the problem families have with employees may come from overemphasizing the negative. Rather than talk about the few rewards for employees, such as low pay and lack of fringe benefits, families tended to focus their discussions on employee shortcomings.

## Strategies to Strengthen Families

- Develop a job description(s) for hired help. It saves time in the long run and decreases misunderstandings.
- Develop a job performance manual that describes the hiring process, the training that needs to take place, job standards, and how job performance will be evaluated.
- Go out of your way to thank and reward your reliable employees so they stay longer. A lower turnover rate means less time training and hiring staff; and less stress.
- Regular farm business meetings are important. Use them to keep everyone informed and give employees the chance to talk about their concerns.
- Encourage employees to work independently so they won't rely on you for direction for every task. Provide enough instruction to do the job so you aren't interrupted regularly.
- Check references and screen applicants carefully to hire the best possible employees. It's a step that many think is "extra," but it prevents a lot of problems.
- Take advantage of University of Minnesota Extension Service publications on managing employees

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