



The Hidden Costs of Success: The Impact of Professional Careers on Parenting and Child Well-Being in Professional Families

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Article History:

Received: 30-10-2024

Revision: 21-11-2024

Accepted: 09-12-2025

Publication: 07-06-2025

Cite this article as:

Rammutla, C. M. (2025). The Hidden Costs of Success: The Impact of Professional Careers on Parenting and Child Well-Being in Professional Families. *Innovation Journal of Social Sciences and Economic Review*, 7(2), 01-10.
doi.org/10.36923/ijsser.v7i2.284

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Abstract: This systematic review examines how professional parents manage parenting responsibilities amid demanding work schedules and increasing career pressures. In recent years, much of professional parents' time has been consumed by work-related obligations, often at the expense of parenting and family engagement. This imbalance is reflected in parents' behaviors towards their children, as the pursuit of professional success frequently carries hidden costs that compromise children's emotional and developmental well-being. The study employed the PRISMA methodology to ensure a rigorous and transparent review process. Using three search strategies, relevant empirical and peer-reviewed research articles published up to 24 October 2024 were identified across multiple databases, including ResearchGate, Google Scholar, Taylor & Francis, and Scopus. The primary aim of the study is to raise awareness among professional parents, organizations, and policymakers regarding the importance of balancing work demands with parenting responsibilities. By recognizing how professional success may inadvertently undermine family relationships, parents and employers can adopt more supportive practices that allow for healthier work-family integration, ultimately benefiting both professional parents and their children.

Keywords: Professional parents, Parenting, Careers in Parenting, Children's well-being, Work-life balance

1. Introduction

Parenting for professionals presents complex challenges, particularly due to competing demands between work and family responsibilities. Many professional parents struggle to balance heavy workloads, strict deadlines, and long working hours, often at the expense of quality time with their children. As Chen et al. (2022) point out, higher job positions often come with increased responsibilities, sometimes forcing parents to work late into the night or early in the morning. Professionals frequently attend meetings, workshops, and trainings, often bringing work home, which leads to an imbalance where children receive less attention (Genadek & Hill, 2017).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many parents worked from home, yet paradoxically, some spent even less meaningful time with their children despite physical proximity (Bernhardt, Recksiedler & Linberg, 2021). Parenting styles and relationships outside of work hours play a critical role in determining whether such disruptions impact children negatively (Aghi & Bhatia, 2021). Good parenting extends beyond financial provision to include emotional, psychological, and moral guidance, aligned with the expectations of the surrounding community and culture (Kavita & Singh, 2020).

Professional parents often pursue career growth to secure financial stability and create better futures for their children (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017). However, the pressure to succeed professionally may result in physical and emotional absence, even when parents and children live in the same household. Frequently, professional parents prioritize work after a long day by ensuring that children eat and complete their homework, while deflecting children's attempts at engagement by offering distractions such as television or mobile devices (Ahmed et al., 2024; Breiner, Ford & Gadsden, 2016). Though such strategies may seem like efficient solutions to manage competing demands, they deprive children of critical opportunities to receive moral guidance, emotional support, and values education.

Stressful work environments may also result in parental irritability, harsh discipline, or emotional withdrawal, which can harm children's self-esteem, leading to feelings of rejection, worthlessness, and emotional distress (Erin & Phyllis, 2021). The emotional climate of the home—including the quality of the parent-child relationship, parenting styles, and emotional responsiveness—plays a crucial role in fostering children's emotional regulation, resilience, and overall well-being (Morris et al., 2017; Frosch et al., 2019).

In certain cultural contexts, such as among Black South African families, professional success has brought social mobility and financial independence previously inaccessible under apartheid (Magubane, 2017). In Pedi, Tshivenda, and Tsonga

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communities, hard work and wealth accumulation are associated with social respect. However, the drive for economic success often pressures parents to focus on work, sacrificing valuable parenting time. Extended family members are frequently tasked with childcare responsibilities, which may expose children to neglect or abuse, especially in rural provinces such as Limpopo (Hall & Mokomane, 2018). The erosion of direct parent-child relationships diminishes essential emotional bonds and undermines children's holistic development. This creates an urgent need for institutional policies and workplace reforms that promote work-life balance and support parents in fulfilling both professional and parenting roles.

Parenting encompasses a wide range of responsibilities, from meeting basic needs to fostering emotional and intellectual growth (Massucco, 2021). Yet, many professional parents find it difficult to manage workloads, meet deadlines, and maintain meaningful engagement with their children. Children naturally seek their parents' attention and are eager to share their experiences (Aeon et al., 2021). When met with parental fatigue, irritability, or indifference, children may withdraw, experiencing resentment, anxiety, and diminished self-worth (Ward et al., 2014). Over time, these emotional wounds can widen the relational gap between parent and child.

Children may attempt to compensate for emotional neglect by developing coping mechanisms such as attention-seeking behaviors, acting out, or forming unhealthy peer associations (Marici et al., 2023). They may also engage in risky behaviors such as substance abuse, delinquency, or excessive screen time. In some cases, children adopt antisocial behaviors, lash out at others, or engage in destructive activities in an attempt to capture parental attention (Klopper, 2019). Ultimately, professional parents' career pursuits, while intended to benefit their children, may ironically result in emotional distance and missed developmental milestones (Massucco, 2021).

The consequences of professional absence extend beyond individual families, reflecting broader work-family conflict challenges that lack adequate theoretical exploration, particularly in contexts where demands and resources interact (Kiburz, Allen, & French, 2017). Despite some existing studies on work-life balance and parenting stress, few have systematically examined how professional parents navigate these competing demands and how their absence affects children's well-being, especially within the South African cultural and socio-economic context. This study seeks to address this gap by systematically reviewing existing literature on the hidden costs of professional success on parenting, with special attention to South African professional families.

This study contributes to the theoretical discourse by integrating Attachment Theory and Work-Family Balance Theory within the specific context of professional families, a population that remains underexplored in the existing literature. While prior studies have examined work-life balance broadly, this review highlights how professional parents' pursuit of career success introduces unique parenting challenges that directly disrupt parent-child attachment processes. By situating these dynamics within Attachment Theory, the study emphasizes how sustained work-related absence may weaken emotional bonds, resulting in adverse developmental outcomes for children. Furthermore, by applying Work-Family Balance Theory, the study extends existing models by illustrating how professional ambition and organizational culture can create chronic work-life conflicts that surpass individual coping capacities, particularly in emerging economies like South Africa. Thus, this review advances theoretical understanding by contextualizing the interaction between work demands, parenting practices, and child development within both family systems theory and socio-economic realities of professional families.

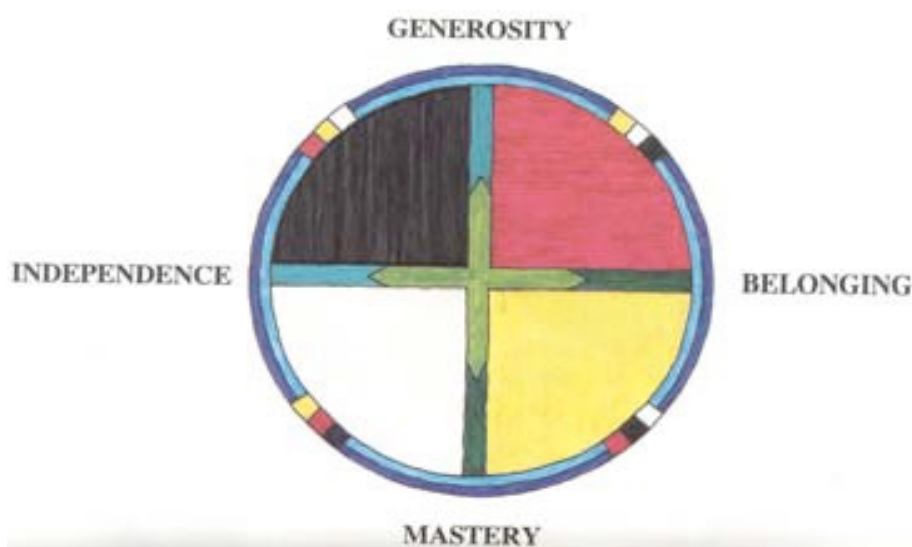


Figure 1: The Circle of Courage Model

Table 1: The imbalance of professional work and parenting in the holistic development stages of the child.

Circle of courage	Markers of Resilience	Foundations of Self-Worth
Belonging	Attachment	Significance
Mastery	Achievement	Competence
Independence	Autonomy	Power
Generosity	Altruism	Virtue

Source: By the author

2. Literature Review

2.1. Professionals' Balance Between Work And Home

Balancing family responsibilities and professional obligations is a continuous challenge for professional parents, who are often required to fulfill both roles simultaneously. Mahasha (2016) highlights that an increasing number of families are recognizing the importance of achieving work-life balance, especially among women who strive to manage these dual responsibilities without compromising their personal well-being. Some professional parents, particularly in medical and social science fields, often prioritize family over career, citing stress, fatigue, and family conflict as reasons for stepping back from demanding professional roles (Sheikh et al., 2018). Regardless of their specific professions, most professionals struggle to maintain a healthy work-life balance due to long working hours, inflexible schedules, and high job demands, which frequently lead to stress, family disputes, and diminished family cohesion.

For example, in South Africa, nurses often work irregular day and night shifts that disrupt family routines and rob children of consistent parental involvement. In response to such pressures, some individuals leave their professions or seek alternative careers that allow for greater flexibility and more family time (Akanji, Mordi & Ajonbadi, 2020). As professional parents increasingly dedicate more time to work and less to family, the emotional bonds and attachment between parents and children weaken, eroding family harmony and stability.

Sheikh et al. (2018) argue that organizations must adopt flexible work policies, allowing professionals to negotiate work schedules that accommodate both career and family needs. In South Africa, some companies have begun offering flexible work arrangements since the COVID-19 pandemic; however, many of these policies remain informal and inconsistently applied. In some cases, professional parents still face after-hours obligations, such as responding to student queries or grading assignments in higher education institutions. Without formalized, enforceable policies, professionals continue to struggle with blurred work-life boundaries. Formal written policies are essential to safeguard parenting time, prevent extended work encroachment into family life, and support the developmental needs of children.

2.2. Mental Health, Fatigue, and Stress Among Professionals and Its Impact on Children

Many families depend on the income generated by professional parents for financial security. However, the chronic stress and fatigue that accompany professional careers can have serious negative consequences for both parents and their children. Singh et al. (2020) demonstrate that professional fatigue is strongly correlated with depression, chronic health conditions, and workplace stress. With rising competition across industries, professionals are compelled to invest substantial time and energy into work, often at the expense of family involvement (da Costa & Pinto, 2017). This persistent work commitment may lead children to take on premature responsibilities or deprive them of critical guidance in developing life values and coping mechanisms.

Parenting itself is inherently stressful and complex, with parenting stress exerting significant adverse effects not only on parents' well-being but also on parenting behaviors and child development (Mikolajczak et al., 2018). When parents are emotionally exhausted from work, they often withdraw both physically and emotionally from their children, using limited parenting time for rest rather than engagement. This emotional distance may leave children feeling abandoned, unloved, or rejected, prompting them to develop maladaptive coping mechanisms to manage the absence of parental attention. Dürüst (2018) suggests that while children's emotional bonds can flourish if parents remain actively engaged, such balance requires deliberate efforts to manage work-life demands.

Without adequate balance, professional parents' pursuit of career success may inadvertently foster negative developmental outcomes in children, including behavioral, emotional, and psychological difficulties that persist into adulthood.

2.3. Absent Parents and Child Neglect

Parental absence and neglect stem from multiple factors, including insufficient time for caregiving, work-related pressures, and poor time management. Children who require close parental attachment suffer significantly from these patterns of absence and neglect. As defined by Dickerson et al. (2017), neglect refers to the failure of caregivers to meet children's basic physical, emotional, or intellectual needs.

Working parents who dedicate insufficient time to their children may unintentionally contribute to behavioral and emotional difficulties. According to Mengtong and Ling (2016), both positive and negative effects can arise from parental absence; however, children experiencing neglect are typically more vulnerable and at higher risk of developing behavioral problems in the absence of supervision. In South Africa, high poverty rates exacerbate this

problem, forcing many parents to work long hours, which increases the prevalence of neglect and exposes children to potential abuse (Maguire-Jack & Font, 2017).

Moreover, professional parents who experience work-related burnout often experience parental burnout simultaneously, further contributing to child neglect (Mikolajczak, Brianda, Avalosse & Roskam, 2018). Some parents, overwhelmed by the accumulated pressure, even consider extreme measures, including suicide, as they struggle to reconcile their professional and parental roles while witnessing their children suffer as a consequence (Deleuze et al., 2015).

2.4. Theoretical Framework

a. Attachment Theory

Attachment theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how professional parents' work commitments affect their children's emotional development. Attachment refers to children's innate need for closeness and emotional security with their parents, particularly when they feel vulnerable or afraid (Fearon & Roisman, 2017). This early bonding process forms the foundation for children's future relational patterns, emotional regulation, and psychological well-being (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2022).

Early parent-child interactions shape children's capacity for trust, resilience, and emotional intelligence throughout their lifespan (Doinita & Maria, 2015). Brumariu (2015) emphasizes that strong attachment relationships are closely linked to healthy emotional development, adaptability, and personality formation. Secure attachments foster emotional growth, while disruptions in this bond may result in long-term developmental challenges (Cooke et al., 2019). Therefore, despite demanding work schedules, professional parents must prioritize quality time and emotional reassurance for their children to maintain secure attachment bonds.

b. Work-Family Balance Theory

Work-family balance theory highlights the interdependence between professional and personal roles, emphasizing the need for individuals to balance work commitments with family responsibilities (Khateeb, 2021). Failure to manage these competing demands often results in heightened family tensions and strained relationships (Khalid, 2023). Professional parents, while driven to provide financial security, must remain conscious that neglecting family involvement can produce adverse consequences for their children's emotional and psychological development.

Hirschi, Shockley, and Zacher (2019) argue that achieving work-family balance is influenced by personal values and willingness to make sacrifices. Professionals who do not prioritize family may fail to recognize the need for balance until significant damage has occurred. Thus, proactive organizational policies, along with personal prioritization of family time, are essential for protecting both professional success and family well-being.

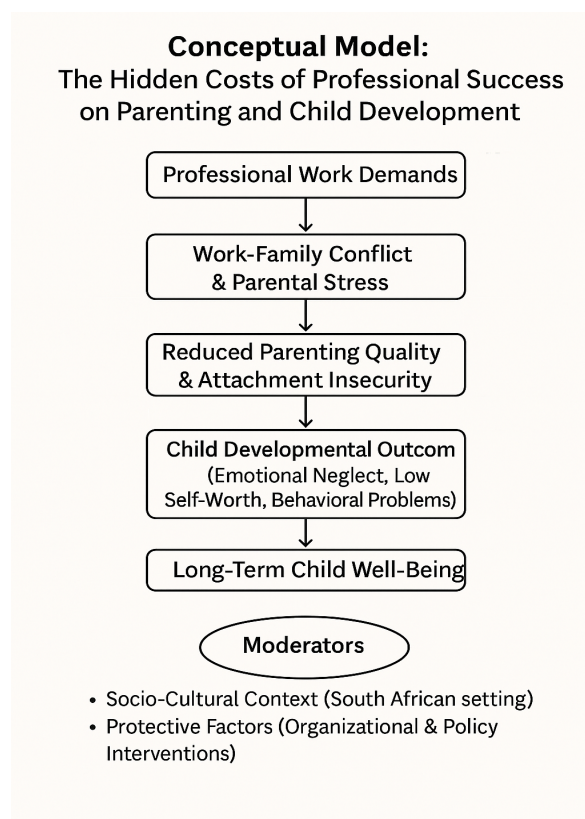


Figure 2: Conceptual Model

c. Conceptual Model: The Hidden Costs of Professional Success on Parenting and Child Development

This model conceptualizes the relationship between professional parents' work demands and child developmental outcomes, mediated by parenting behaviors and attachment processes within the family. Increasing professional demands, such as long work hours, deadlines, career pressures, and organizational expectations, create heightened work-family conflict and parental stress. This strain results in emotional unavailability, physical absence, or diminished parental responsiveness, directly weakening parent-child attachment security. As attachment weakens, children may experience emotional neglect, diminished self-worth, and maladaptive coping mechanisms such as risky behaviors or emotional withdrawal. Over time, these outcomes impair children's emotional, psychological, and behavioral development. The model is embedded within the broader socio-economic and cultural context of South Africa, where financial pressures, societal expectations, and extended family structures further moderate these relationships. Organizational policies, supportive work environments, and family-friendly regulations may act as protective factors that help mitigate these negative outcomes.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Systematic Review Approach

This study adopted a systematic review methodology to synthesize and critically evaluate existing literature on the effects of professional parents' work-life balance on parenting and child development. The systematic review approach allows for a comprehensive and transparent aggregation of empirical evidence, offering a clear understanding of recurring themes, patterns, and research gaps across multiple studies. The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, which provide a standardized framework for conducting and reporting systematic reviews with methodological rigor, transparency, and replicability (Welch et al., 2015).

3.2. Application of the PRISMA Framework

The PRISMA protocol was employed to ensure consistency in the identification, selection, appraisal, and synthesis of relevant literature. The use of PRISMA enhances the reproducibility of the study and ensures that the review process adheres to international standards of systematic review methodology (Cortese et al., 2022). This protocol guided the entire review process, from database searching to final article selection, ensuring that relevant studies were appropriately included while maintaining objectivity and rigor.

3.3. Search Strategy and Data Sources

An extensive search was conducted across four widely recognized and reputable databases: ResearchGate, Google Scholar, Taylor & Francis, and Scopus. These databases were selected due to their comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed academic publications relevant to the fields of parenting, work-life balance, and child development. A scientifically designed search strategy was utilized, incorporating key search terms that reflected the scope and focus of the study. These terms included "professional parents," "costs of success in different families," "children's well-being," "balancing career and parenting," "families with professional parents," and "parenting styles." The combination of these keywords ensured that the search captured a broad spectrum of relevant studies across diverse geographical and disciplinary contexts.

Table 2: Inclusion and exclusion Criteria

Inclusion	Exclusion
Articles available online and written between 2012 to 2024.	Scholarly documents written before 2012 but not readily available online.
Scholarly document written in English.	Scholarly documents not written in English.
Studies covering professional families and their impact on children.	Studies covering professional families but not having any impact on children.
Global and local studies that addressed the hidden costs of success on professional parents, with an emphasis on the South African context.	Global and local studies that focus on the hidden costs of success to all families.
Studies covering work-life balance and fitting the final analysis criteria.	Studies covering work-life balance but did not fit the final analysis criteria.

Source: By the author

3.1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

In order to maintain focus and relevance, strict inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied. Studies were included if they were published between 2012 and 2024, written in English, and addressed the relationship between professional parents' work commitments and child outcomes. Studies were also included if they examined work-life balance in professional families, with particular emphasis on the South African context while remaining open to relevant global literature. Studies were excluded if they were published prior to 2012, not readily available online, written in languages other than English, or if they discussed professional families without considering child development outcomes. Furthermore, studies unrelated to work-life balance or not addressing the specific focus of this review were excluded.

3.2. Selection Process

The initial search identified 195 records across the selected databases. Following the removal of duplicate and irrelevant records, 130 articles remained for further screening. After an in-depth review, 70 studies were shortlisted, of which 15 were excluded due to their unrelated focus on other population groups, such as individuals living with albinism in South Africa. A subsequent screening phase led to the exclusion of 33 additional articles that did not meet the eligibility requirements. Ultimately, 12 peer-reviewed journal articles met all inclusion criteria and were included in the final analysis for this systematic review.

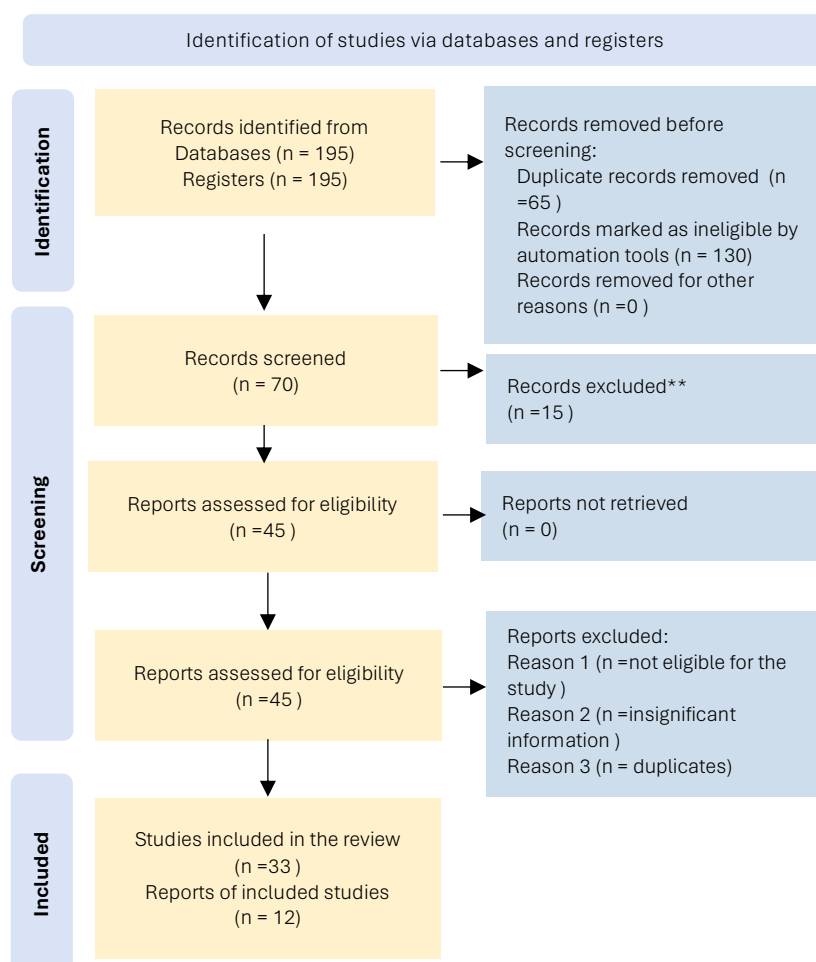


Figure 3: PRISMA 2020 flow diagram

The complete search process that the researcher carried out is shown in the table below. A total of twelve peer-reviewed journal publications were located using various databases and included in the current study.

Table 3: An overview of the journal papers used in the study.

Author(s) / year and country of publication	Scholarly document	Methods	Theoretical framework(s)
Dash, Anand & Gangadharan (2012); South Africa	Journal article	Descriptive statistics, scale	N/A
Sheikh, Ashiq, Mehar, Hasan & Khalid, (2018); Pakistan	Journal article	Qualitative interviews, in-depth hypothesis testing	N/A
Akanji, Mordi & Ajonbadi, (2020); United Kingdom	Journal article	Interpretive constructionism, data analysis	WLB and spillover theory
Sturges (2012); United Kingdom	Journal article	Qualitative interviews, in-depth	N/A
Singh, Karanika-Murray, Baguley & Hudson (2020);	Journal article	inductive content analysis	N/A
da Costa & Pinto, (2017); UK	Journal article	Content analysis	N/A
Mikolajczak, Raes, Avalosse & Roskam, (2018); Belgium	Journal article	Data Analyses	N/A

Author(s) / year and country of publication	Scholarly document	Methods	Theoretical framework(s)
Dürüst (2018); Turkey	Journal article	Qualitative interviews, in-depth scales, data analysis	N/A
Dickerson, Lindner, Scurich & Quas, (2017); USA	Journal article	Qualitative interviews, post hoc analyses	N/A
Mengtong & Ling (2016); China	Journal article	Data analysis	N/A
Maguire-Jack & Font, (2017); USA	Journal article	Data analysis	Multilevel Models
Deleuze, Rochat, Romo, Van der Linden, Achab, Thorens & Billieux, (2015); Belgium	Journal article	Qualitative interviews, online survey, data analysis	N/A

Source: By the author

4. Discussion

Parenting is inherently complex, and professional parents encounter additional challenges as they navigate the competing demands of employment, family responsibilities, and childcare. In many cases, parents are compelled to work extended hours or take on multiple jobs to ensure financial stability, especially in contexts such as South Africa, where economic pressures are particularly acute. While parents often justify these sacrifices as necessary for their children's well-being, the reality is that such work commitments frequently deprive children of meaningful parental presence. As a consequence, many children experience both emotional and physical neglect due to reduced parental engagement. In the absence of adequate parental involvement, children may turn to alternative sources—such as neighbors, domestic helpers, or peers—to seek the moral guidance, emotional support, and values that parents are ideally positioned to provide. This transfer of influence often exposes children to inconsistent or potentially harmful models of behavior, contributing to unstable family structures and compromised developmental outcomes.

The cumulative effects of these hidden costs of professional success are significant, ultimately weakening professional parents' ability to refine their parenting skills and sustain healthy relationships with their children. Some parents, driven by professional ambition and social mobility, inadvertently sacrifice quality family time and emotional bonding, leading their children to experience heightened levels of stress, trauma, and neglect. As Sturges (2012:21) aptly observes, individuals often make temporary compromises in work-life balance in pursuit of long-term career benefits; however, these sacrifices frequently exact lasting costs on children, families, and future generations. The consequences extend beyond immediate developmental challenges, potentially undermining children's emotional resilience, attachment security, and sense of self-worth.

This study highlights the urgent need to raise awareness among professional families and working parents about the importance of achieving a sustainable balance between professional ambitions and parenting responsibilities. Neglecting either domain may lead to profound and irreversible consequences for children who depend on their parents for emotional support, protection, and moral guidance. By maintaining a balanced approach, parents can safeguard not only their children's well-being but also the long-term stability of the family unit as a whole.

5. Limitations of the Study

Although this study provides valuable insights into the hidden costs of professional success on parenting and child development, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the systematic review was based on a relatively limited number of empirical studies, with only twelve peer-reviewed articles ultimately meeting the inclusion criteria. This restricted sample may not fully capture the complete diversity and complexity of professional parenting experiences across different global contexts. Second, the review relied entirely on secondary data, which limits the ability to control for methodological differences across the included studies, such as variations in research design, sample characteristics, and measurement tools. Third, the focus on literature published in English may have excluded relevant studies published in other languages, particularly within non-Western or underrepresented regions. Fourth, while the South African context was emphasized, broader comparative analyses across other developing countries would further enrich the understanding of cultural, economic, and institutional influences on professional parenting. Lastly, the study synthesized cross-sectional findings; thus, causal relationships between professional work demands and child outcomes should be interpreted cautiously. Future research employing longitudinal designs and diverse sampling frames would be valuable in addressing these limitations and further validating the findings.

6. Conclusions And Future Direction

While many families and parents prioritize financial stability as a measure of success, it is crucial to recognize that parenting extends far beyond financial provision. Raising children requires consistent emotional, physical, psychological, and mental support. Professional parents, in particular, must actively seek a sustainable balance between their careers and family responsibilities to ensure that their children receive adequate parental attention and engagement, whether parents are working from home or at their physical workplaces. Achieving this balance requires not only personal adjustments but also open communication with both employers and family members to

mitigate the hidden costs of professional success, which otherwise may have detrimental consequences for children's emotional development and family cohesion. As this study demonstrates, failure to establish such a balance may result in long-term emotional harm, ultimately leading to children who struggle with feelings of neglect, low self-esteem, and emotional instability.

To address these concerns, several key recommendations are proposed. First, corporate and welfare organizations should adopt comprehensive family-friendly workplace policies. These policies may include extending parental leave, offering accessible counseling services, and establishing peer support groups that enable employees to better manage the competing demands of career advancement and parenting. Implementing such policies would contribute to improving and amending existing legislation, such as Section 27(1) of Chapter 2 of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA) of South Africa.

Second, professional parents themselves should pursue practical strategies that allow greater flexibility in balancing work and family obligations. These may include options such as remote work, job sharing, or the establishment of family-oriented workplace support services. In some cases, employers may also consider allowing spouses or family members to assist with certain non-sensitive professional tasks, thus enabling parents to better integrate family participation into their work routines without compromising work performance.

Finally, while the amendment of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act 17 of 1999, introduced by President Cyril Ramaphosa in 2020, grants working parents 10 consecutive days of parental leave, this study recommends that such leave provisions be further extended. Specifically, parental leave should be aligned with the school holiday schedules in South Africa to allow parents additional time to engage meaningfully with their children during extended school breaks.

Future research may further explore the long-term developmental outcomes of children raised in professional families under varying work-life balance conditions, as well as assess the effectiveness of organizational policies aimed at promoting work-family integration. Such investigations will provide valuable insights for policymakers, organizations, and families seeking to protect children's well-being while supporting parents' professional aspirations.

Acknowledgement Statement: The authors would like to thank to all participants and the reviewers for providing comments in helping this manuscript to completion.

Conflicts of interest: The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Authors' contribution statements: Author 1 contributed to the Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, and Writing - Original Draft, Software, Validation, Data Curation, and Project Administration.

Funding statements: As there was no external funding received for this research, the study was conducted without financial support from any funding agency or organization.

Ethical consideration statement: Since this study did not involve human or animal subjects, ethical considerations related to participant welfare, informed consent, and privacy were not applicable. However, ethical standards regarding academic integrity, transparency, and proper citation were upheld throughout the research process.

Data availability statement: Data is available at request. Please contact the corresponding author for any additional information on data access or usage.

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