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## Staying home with the kids

By Melanie Conklin

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Dads from Happy Bambino's At-Home Dad's group at Monty's Blue Plate after group.

Josh Wendt [**HB At-Home Dads group**] didn't plan to be a stay-at-home dad. Yet he's been home in Madison with his 14-month-old daughter Josie for 10 months. His wife had switched jobs to cut gas costs, but the payoff for continuing his landscaping work wasn't sufficient.

"My wife was making more money than me and it didn't make sense," Wendt said. "It was difficult, but the difference between day care costs and me working was a few hundred dollars a month."

Wendt's situation is not unique. The bumpy economy is causing some parents to exit or re-enter the workforce in moves that are not always planned or voluntary. Layoffs and the high cost of child care and other work-related expenses have squeezed some parents out of the workforce. At the same time, the rising prices of gas, food and other essentials have pushed others who planned to stay home with their children back to work.

Ryan Ramig [**HB At-Home Dads group facilitator**] used to work nights while his wife worked days. Since being laid off, he stays home on Madison's East Side with his two children, ages 8 months and 5 years. "I was the breadwinner, now my wife is," Ramig said, smiling at his baby daughter Ariana playing on the floor. "I have it a lot better than other people -- I don't have to rush to find a new job."

In Dane County 78 percent of families with children under 18 have all their parents in the workforce. Nationwide the percent of children under 15 with stay-at-home parents has risen from 23 percent in 1994 to 27 percent in 2007, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, but recently released figures show a slight drop from 28 percent in 2006.

Numbers don't tell the whole story because people unemployed but actively seeking work, like Ramig, are counted in the workforce. Nor does it show how the faltering economy is pushing parents both directions. With licensed child care for infants averaging more than \$1,000 a month in Dane County, working isn't always financially viable for parents with babies and preschoolers.

"Some people at home are going to work because they need it and other people are pulling back," said David Edie, who has been watching work and family trends for decades first in state government and now at Wisconsin Council on Children and Families. "Some families can afford to have a parent at home, but in many situations people are making extraordinary cuts and sacrifices to do it. Others simply can't afford not to be at work."

### 'Economic cushion'

Another catch for at-home parents in tough economic times is this: Rising prices not only make it harder to live off one income -- it is also more riskier to put the family's financial eggs in one basket.

"Dual-earner couples probably help to recession-proof the economy to some extent," said Janet Hyde, UW-Madison professor of psychology. "If both parents are employed and one is laid off, the economic impact on the family is devastating, but less devastating than if the laid-off person were the sole earner. Families with a stay-at-home parent don't have that economic cushion."

So families create their own cushion by cutting back. The most frequent cuts cited by at-home parents were meals out, kids' paid activities, delaying major purchases or vacations and driving less frequently.

"What you see in reality is parents wildly experimenting to come up with some model that works," said Dave Riley, a child and family specialist with UW-Extension and a UW-Madison human ecology professor. He said it has led to families trying models like split shifts between parents, seeking part-time care or making big cuts in the family budget to get by on one income to allow a parent to remain home.

For Ally Moll, [HB Customer] a single mother in Middleton who is trying to stay home as much as she can with her four-month-old daughter, that choice required taking on variety of at-home jobs, renting a room she shares with her baby in a friend's condo and foregoing professional haircuts, new clothes and her artistic hobbies.

Cassandra Edwards always wanted to be an at-home parent and left her good job as a research engineer for Kraft when her son Miles was born two-and-a-half years ago. To prepare for it, she and her husband began living off his income, putting her salary into savings. After her son was born, she founded a local chapter of Mocha Moms, a national group that offers social and emotional support for primarily at-home mothers of color. She frequently hears from members whose choice to stay home is forcing cuts.

"Members talk about diminishing returns," Edwards said. "It's becoming a common topic."

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Cassandra Edwards chose to leave a career at Kraft to stay home with her son Miles. She founded a local chapter of Mocha Moms, a support group for stay-at-home mothers of color. She said the bumpy economy is a frequent topic at their weekly meetings at Family Enhancement.

(JOHN MANIACI - State Journal)

Such stories are familiar to Denise Cusack from visitors to her popular Web site called Moms in Madison ([www.momsinmadison.com](http://www.momsinmadison.com)), which lists activities, resources, play groups and has an active Yahoo group for parents to chat, with more than 1,000 members.

"I know the economy has been one of the topics often discussed," Cusack said. "I know many moms have downsized their homes and cars, tightened budgets and eliminated so many things to stay home." She combines errands and shops closer to home.

Hearts at Home, a national organization dedicated to supporting at-home moms based in Illinois, has lost help as the rough economy push some members back in to the workforce. "We've seen the economic impact in our volunteer base," said Lori Heil, the group's marketing assistant. "Some people are having to withdraw from helping us because they have to go back to the workforce."

### **Making money at home**

Another increasingly common scenario is the stay-at-home parent bringing in some form of income. National Web sites for at-home parents are plastered with ads for jobs from home that utilize technology such as filling out Internet surveys or selling on eBay.

Leah Buysse [former HB Resource Center Coordinator] quit her job as a banker to stay home when she and her partner Randii Waddell had their daughter Carli, 21 months ago. Buysse now runs a small business from home in holistic consulting. But like many small businesses, the economy hit that, too.

"The holistic consulting is considered by many an extra expense and therefore has been one of the first things that my clients have cut as their pocketbooks dwindled with the economy," Buysse said. "So along with things costing more for us, we have lost income from my business." To bring in money, she took a summer job driving a teen to all her activities and sells items on Craigslist.

Another common at-home-parent job is caring for additional kids.

Heather Kolb, a Middleton native, was living in the state of Oregon after she and her husband had twin daughters two years ago and realized that with two children in child care, she'd net less than \$1 per hour to work.

"After quitting my job money was very tight," Kolb explained. "We were living in a house that we could afford with two salaries, but could not afford on one."

They put the house on the market, moved back to Dane County and have been living with her mother. Their Oregon house, despite drastic price cuts, is still on the market and will move into foreclosure within four months if it doesn't sell.

Kolb puts groceries on a credit card, uses eBay to sell clothes Ava and Addyson outgrow and has begun providing child care for a friend's boy. She may add a cousin's child as well.

"The extra money that it brings really helps with everyday costs like groceries and kids' clothes," Kolb said.

### **New kinds of requests**

Janette Paulson, director of workforce initiatives from the Wisconsin Early Childhood Association, said the day-care centers she works with aren't closing, but they are getting new kinds of requests.

"What we are hearing is the requests for more varied needs of care for people because they are taking on a second job, or they need care during weekends or evening hours, or they want to find a center closer to home because of the cost of gas," Paulson said. "People are looking for more creative solutions and families are needing to put together a myriad of options."

### **Rare socializing**

Growing up in Madison, Betty Banks remembers her at-home mother heading down East Dayton Street in her housecoat with kids in tow to visit cousins and neighbors. With so many parents working now, she said that kind of socializing is rare.

So in her job at Family Enhancement, Banks seeks to recreate that community for at-home parents by hosting a Fun Zone two mornings a week for open play. "It breaks the isolation for both kids and parents," Banks said.

Isolation is a greater concern as parents spend more time at home due to rising gas prices. But Madison-area parents interviewed say they are helped by the plethora of free places to meet such as library toddler times, Henry Vilas zoo, parks, Art Cart, Olbrich and such no-cost activities as Kids in the Rotunda or Dane Dances.

Nick Stroud, [HB At-Home Dads Group member] stay-at-home dad to 15-month-old Knowl, moved in July from New York City to Madison for his wife's new job. In New York, he said, it cost a lot in time and money just to get to a grocery store. Here, he said, he's found more activities to do with his son.

One cost that is on-par with New York City, however, is child care -- and it is harder to find an available spot here, he said. That surprised him and, for now, it keeps him home with Knowl.

"I'd have to find a well-paying job to afford to balance day care," Stroud said. "I'm not rushing."

#### Web sites for stay-at-home parents:

- Moms in Madison includes lists of activities and playgroups, among other local resources.

[www.momsinmadison.com](http://www.momsinmadison.com)

- For information on the Fun Zone:

[www.familyenhancement.org/](http://www.familyenhancement.org/)


- Mocha Moms Inc.:

[www.mochamoms.org](http://www.mochamoms.org)

- Happy Bambino play groups, including stay-at-home dads group:

[www.happybambino.com](http://www.happybambino.com)

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Heather Kolb quit her job to stay home with her twin daughters Ava and Addyson, age 2. Kolb said high gas prices cause her to "pack as many errands into one trip" as she can.

(JOHN MAMIACI - State Journal)