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ORIGINAL PAPER

Giving Voice to Working Mothers: A Consumer Informed Study to Program Design for Working Mothers

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Abstract Working parents experience considerable stress as they strive to cope with competing demands from work and family. However, workforce participation has shown to safeguard their personal wellbeing. It is therefore important that parents are adequately supported though appropriate and acceptable interventions in order to help them achieve quality of life, without needing to sacrifice one life domain for the other. This study adopted a consumer-focused perspective to program design to identify the relative fit between parental needs an existing workplace intervention. Focus groups were conducted with fifteen working mothers aged 30–44 years ($M = 38.67$). A thematic analysis revealed eight themes: (a) the impact of guilt, (b) crossover effects of work on family, (c) the availability of support, (d) being a quality parent, (e) getting the balance right, (f) impact on couple relationship, (g) having a career counts and (h) the need for low intensity programs. The extracted themes provided a good fit with existing workplace interventions that address stress and parenting. However, the results also indicated that working mothers need further assistance with strategies to manage guilt and the need to build on career strengths. Working parents also indicated a desire for briefer interventions. The implications for program design, including possible modifications, to current workplace interventions are discussed.

Keywords Work–family conflict · Working parents · Parenting · Families · Consumer psychology · Intervention development · Qualitative

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Introduction

The rise in dual-earner families, coupled with the increase in working hours, has made work–family balance more difficult to achieve for parents (Michel et al. 2011). In turn, this has spurred a plethora of research investigating the work–family interface (Allen et al. 2000; Carlson and Kacmar 2000; Frone et al. 1997; Gareis et al. 2009). Parents juggling work and parenting responsibilities are at particular risk for work and family conflict, although such challenges may change, as children become older and less dependent, and concomitant with career and lifestyle changes in parents. Research suggests parents of young children experience the most difficulty, as they strive to cope with competing demands related to completing parenting and work related tasks (Duxbury and Higgins 1994).

There is a well-established literature demonstrating the numerous negative effects that can result from high levels of work–family conflict; including, adverse consequences at home (e.g., impaired parent–child interaction, marital conflict), and in the workplace (e.g., lower job satisfaction, decreased job performance) (Buonocore and Russo 2012; Vaananen et al. 2008). Consequently, some researchers have developed interventions aimed at reducing work–family conflict and improving work-life balance (e.g., Workplace Triple P: Haslam et al. 2013). However, such programs have been developed largely without consumer input, and although efficacious, little is known about how well they fit the needs of working parents, if they could be further modified to enhance low levels of parental engagement, or to improve outcomes. Increasingly researchers are arguing for the benefit of qualitative consumer focused data collection for the purposes of intervention development and refinement (Santucci et al. 2012). However there are no published qualitative consumer focused studies looking at parental preferences for

work–family balance support programs. Consumer's insights are particularly valuable when dealing with complex issues, such as work–family balance, that comprise intertwined domains (Walter 2009; Whyte et al. 1989). Given that working parents are among the least likely to access support, even when evidence-based interventions exist, research directly examining the needs and preferences of working parents is warranted (Sanders et al. 2011).

WPTP is a 12-h, group-based parenting intervention aimed at improving work-life balance in parents. It is intended to be delivered in an organisational context and covers a range of topics including positive parenting and managing negative emotions (e.g., stress from both home and at work). Randomised controlled trials have now demonstrated its efficacy at improving family and occupational functioning, and decreasing work–family conflict (e.g., Haslam et al. 2013; Sanders et al. 2011). However, based on the evolution of program development and design (Sanders and Kirby 2012) the WPTP program requires further refinement in order to increase parental engagement, and to determine if alternative versions (e.g., a briefer versions or topic specific versions) would be more suited to parents' desires.

The Participatory Action Research Paradigm (PAR) argues that the involvement of consumers is a necessary step in program development and refinement, as it aids in the successful formulation of an ecologically sound program (Walter 2009). In accordance with this framework the program authors of WPTP conducted a web-based survey to assess consumer preferences amongst working parents using quantitative methodology (Sanders et al. 2011). Three areas were assessed: (a) level of difficulties in parenting and balancing work and family; (b) parental perceptions about a workplace parenting intervention; and (c) parents' opinions regarding intervention features. Results revealed that 90 % of parents found balancing work and family to be stressful, and 85 % of participants expressed interest in attending a workplace based parenting program. While this research showed promising results, there were two limitations, which we aim to address in the current study. First, the use of quantitative methodology, while valid and useful, may have restricted parents' abilities to share important thoughts that may not have been expressed using the standardised measures. Second, while the study collected data on parental preferences for intervention formation (e.g., most parents said they would prefer to attend individual sessions) parents were not asked about what content they thought was relevant and in demand for working parents. Given that working parents are the consumers of workplace parenting interventions, a thorough assessment of their views and experiences is needed.

In line with theoretical underpinnings of PAR, a collaborative interaction between program developers and consumers is required to develop meaningful support services. Qualitative research methods such as, focus groups, stakeholder feedback, and web surveys, are examples of methods used to obtain consumer perspectives (Kirby and Sanders 2012). Focus groups are an effective method for gathering a rich narrative of consumer preferences, and are defined as a discussion among a group of people (typically between four and ten individuals), who converse about a topic under the direction of a moderator. The role of the moderator is to foster interaction and ensure that discussions revolve around key research questions (Tremblay et al. 2010). Additionally, focus groups have been argued to provide a more natural environment to consumers than individual interviews (Morgan et al. 1998).

This research is an exploratory study that seeks to gather the perspectives of working mothers, with a view to refine an existing workplace parenting intervention, WPTP. A tailored version of WPTP will allow for a better fit between program characteristics and needs of working parents, and will serve to increase program participation. A consumer perspective approach is adopted to assess the experiences and perspectives of Australian working mothers. This study contributes significantly to the literature by being the first within the field of work–family balance to gather first-hand qualitative perspectives of working mothers for the purposes of intervention development and refinement. The present study had four key aims: (a) identify issues that make balancing work and family life difficult for working mothers; (b) identify factors that make work–family balance easier; (c) identify intervention features (both content and practical) that increase the likelihood of attending a workplace parenting program; and (d) identify barriers that prevent working mothers from attending parenting programs.

Method

Participants

Parents were recruited by sending brochures about the research project to childcare centres, schools, hotels, hospitals and churches across Brisbane. Parents who worked at least 1 day per week and had a child between ages 2 and 12 years were eligible to participate in the study. Participation was restricted by design to parents of young children, as parents of older, less dependent children may differ qualitatively from parents of young children both in levels of conflict experienced and in life and career stage and should be examined separately. Participants were excluded if they failed to meet these eligibility criteria or if they did not speak or read English. A total of 36 parents contacted the project co-ordinator, and based on a screening telephone call, all were deemed eligible. Of the eligible parents 16 (44 %) completed the online survey and attended a follow-up focus group completing the full participation

requirements. The remaining parents either failed to complete the online questionnaire (12 parents) or completed the questionnaire but failed to attend the focus group (8 parents). These parents were also deemed to have declined participation. Reason provided for failing to attend the focus group were difficulties arranging childcare or lack of available time. Although attempts were made to recruit fathers, only one father agreed to participate. As this was deemed an insufficient number the father was excluded from analyses.

Participants were 15 mothers employed in a variety of occupations in Queensland, Australia. Their ages ranged from 30 to 44 years ($M = 38.67$, $SD = 5.03$). Overall, 46.7 % of participants were employed in part-time work and 40 % were employed full-time. The majority (66.7 %) were married, and the average number of children per family was 1.87 ($SD = .64$). Additional demographic details about the sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Sociodemographic characteristics of participants

Variable	N	%
Marital status		
Married	10	66.7
Divorced	2	13.3
Separated	1	6.7
Single	1	6.7
De facto	1	6.7
Current household structure		
Original family (biological/adoptive)	10	66.7
Sole parent family	1	6.7
With extended family (i.e. with parents and grandparent)	3	20.03
Partner working overseas	1	6.68
Participant education		
TAFE/college certificate	1	7.1
University degree	6	42.9
Postgraduate degree	7	50
Participant employment status		
Full-time	6	40.0
Part-time	7	46.7
Casual/relief	2	13.3
Partner education		
Year 12	2	15.4
TAFE/college certificate	1	7.7
Trade/apprenticeship	1	7.7
University degree	4	30.8
Postgraduate degree	5	38.5
Partner employment status		
Full-time	10	83.3
Part-time	1	8.3
Casual/relief	1	8.3
Household income		
Less than $25,000 annually	1	6.7
$25,000–$50,000 annually	2	13.3
$50,000–$70,000 annually	1	6.7
$70,000–$100,000 annually	2	13.3
More than $100,000 annually	9	60.0
Have you ever been to a work–family program or seminar?		
Yes	3	20.0
No	12	80.0

Procedure

The study was approved by The University of Queensland, School of Psychology ethical review committee. Participants who met eligibility criteria were emailed a link to the project web page, and were given a username and password. Participants were provided with an information sheet about the study, and after providing informed consent, a survey was completed and arrangements were made to participate in a focus group.

Four focus groups were conducted with an average of four participants in each group. To eliminate gender bias, a female and male moderator facilitated an equal number of groups. Both moderators were psychologists. Sessions lasted between 100 and120 min and were audio-recorded. The questions utilized in the focus groups were developed according to the questioning route technique devised by Morgan et al. (1998). This questioning technique has been adopted by other researchers investigating consumer's perspectives to program design (Kirby and Sanders 2012). A semi-structured interview schedule was used to guide discussions, and the following eight questions were asked: (a) what are the challenges as a working parent; (b) what are the good things about being a working parent; (c) does being parent impact work; (d) does working impact parenting; (e) what would make you attend a program for working parents; (f) what would stop you from attending a program for working parents; (g) how important is it that programs for working parents have an evidence-base; and (h) what would you like in a program designed specifically for working parents. After introductions, the focus group questions were asked, and participants were instructed to answer as honestly as possible, and to provide examples where possible. If a participant did not answer one of the questions the moderator asked the participant directly their views on the question and whether they would like to contribute.

Measures

Family Background Questionnaire

Participants' demographic details were collected using the family background questionnaire, adapted from the Western Australian Child Health Survey (Zubrick et al. 1995). Participants were also asked about their experience with

parenting workshops and childcare arrangements (e.g., "Have you ever been to a program or seminar aimed at improving work and family balance" and "How is your child cared for while you are at work?"). Satisfaction with childcare arrangements was also assessed (e.g., "To what extent are you satisfied with the quality of care your child receives while you are at work?"). Parents responded using seven-point scale ranging from one (*very dissatisfied*) to seven (*very satisfied*). Seven items were included to investigate perceptions of work-life balance, and were also rated on a seven-point scale, ranging from one (*strongly disagree*) to seven (*strongly agree*) (e.g., "Balancing work and family can be hard").

Data Analyses

Qualitative data were transcribed and analysed via NVivo 10, following Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis, which included: (a) reviewing the data to identify key areas relevant to the research topic; (b) generating initial categories whereby similar areas of text are grouped together across the whole data set; (c) coding potential themes and gathering all data relevant to each theme; (d) reviewing themes checking they are cohesive; (e) finalise the definition and names of themes; and (f) producing the report and selecting vivid and compelling extracts to convey the themes generated (Braun and Clarke 2006). The primary coder was a 22-year-old female undergraduate student, and the secondary coder was a 29-year-old male research fellow, with prior experience conducting and analysing focus group data.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Participants' Opinions about Work–Family Balance

In order to gather general understanding of participants' perceptions regarding work–family balance, and the workplace as a context for parenting support, seven additional items were included in the online questionnaire. Table 2 displays the percentage of parents who agreed or strongly agreed with the seven items. The vast majority of participants (94 %) indicated that balancing work and family was difficult for them, and 81 % of the mothers reported that interventions aimed at assisting parents to cope with work and family life should be made available.

Table 2 Percentage of participants who agreed or strongly agreed with statements about work–family balance

Survey item	Overall % (n)
Balancing work and family can be hard	93.3 (14)
Seminars or programs aimed at assisting parents balance work and family should be made available	80 (13)
I would attend a parenting program or seminar aimed at improving work-life balance	66.7 (10)
Child behaviour makes it more difficult to balance work and family	66.7 (10)
Work pressure or stress makes it more difficult to balance work and family	93.4 (14)
The workplace is an appropriate place to offer parenting support aimed at improving work-life balance	66.6 (10)
I would be more likely to attend a parenting program focus group on work-life balance offered at my workplace than at a clinic	46.6 (7)

Focus Group Findings

The thematic analysis revealed 32 categories that were then grouped into eight key themes (refer to Appendix for full list of categories and themes). A fellow coder, who was part of the research project, examined the reliability of the categories. A focus group was selected at random using a web-based random number generator, and the fellow coder identified 18 categories (original coder identified 19 categories for that specific focus group), which produced a high level of inter-rater reliability $\kappa = .76$ ($p < .001$), 95 % CI [.66–.87]. The eight themes included: (a) the impact of guilt; (b) the crossover effects of work on family; (c) the availability of support; (d) being a quality parent;(e) finding balance; (f) impact on couple relationship, (g) having a career counts; and (h) the need for low intensity programs.

The Impact of Guilt

Guilt was the most salient theme identified and surfaced across all focus groups. The majority of parents were from highly professional backgrounds and reported aspiring to high levels of achievement in their workplaces. In particular, this group of mothers felt strongly in the need to have an active role in both their professional and family life. Despite this, mothers often felt guilty about wanting to have success in both life domains, and reported feeling guilty about not meeting either work or family reponsibilities.

> I can get work-guilt, though…. I'm great with compartmenting the guilt in my life. So work-guilt is when I have to go at 4.30 or 5 O'clock to do a soccer run or something like that, and I know something's due tomorrow at work. (Mother of 3, age 41, employed part-time).

The perception of not seeing their children enough was a commonly expressed factor for the emergence of parental guilt. The following quote is illustrative:

> … my mum's having to take them to school, and bring them back from school. And I feel bad, because I just see them (the children) in the morning and then just before they sleep. (Mother of 2, age 41, casual work).

Through focus groups, it was evident that feelings of guilt ranged on a continuum, with some mothers reporting a greater intensity of guilt than others. For instance, one mother described her feelings of guilt as being *"crippling"*, whereas another mother reported sharing a lower sense of guilt as she prepared to leave for work each morning:

> It starts from 6 in the morning, when she (daughter) wakes up, she lies in bed, while I get ready, and she's telling me: "Mommy, I just don't want you to go to work"… Erm, so that's where the guilt comes in. (Mother of 2, age 34, employed full-time).

Other mothers also commented on experiencing negative emotions in response to not being able to spend time with their children. For example:

> Every day she (the daughter) cries about going to after school care, because she misses me…. I feel horrible (Mother of 3, age 41, employed part-time).

Mothers cited technology as a contributing factor to their experiences of workplace related guilt. The demands on employees to be contactable 24 h a day meant that mothers found it increasingly challenging to '*switch off*' while at home, which in turn had a spillover effect on the quality of parent–child interaction. Mothers reported finding it difficult to mentally disengage from work-related issues, due to expectations on employees to be available *'round the clock'*. Similar to these concerns, mothers felt that technological advancements was the primary reason underpinning the blurring of work and family boundaries.

> I look at it (phone) all the time; I look at it on my day off. I spend time with my daughter—she does ballet on a Monday morning, I spend the half an hour there doing emails, instead of engaging with some of my friends who also have kids. So it's really double edged sword, and I've not learnt how to control it. (Mother of 2, age 43, employed full-time).

We specifically asked participants about the potential for guilt to be reduced, and found that mothers appeared generally of the opinion that little could be done to mitigate guilt, as illustrated by the following comment:

> There's no way you can fix that (guilt) for us? How can you teach someone to get rid of guilt; except to say "build a bridge, and get over it. (Mother of 2, age 33 employed part time).

Crossover Effects of Work on Family

The second theme was in relation to the crossover effects of work on family life. Mothers reported work-to-family conflict as a greater contributor to their stress levels, as opposed to family-to-work conflict. Furthermore, given the permeability of work and family domains, mothers reported that their occupational stress (e.g., work deadlines, longer work hours) often placed restrictions on family life. This finding appeared largely due to the fact that many mothers expressed having a level of personal responsibility to meet deadlines and client expectations. These personal expectations were maintained even if job-related goals could not be met by working standard hours, necessitating the need to work from home or after hours.

> Probably 3 out of 4 weeks, I'll have to bring work home, and a few hours over the weekend… even though I try to leave it (work) till he (son) goes to bed, to then start working again, sometimes I know that I've to start working earlier… so the DVD goes on and I start working. (Single mother of 1, age 31, employed full-time).

To date, there have been several reports suggesting part-time work as a possible solution to work–family issues (Higgins, Duxbury and Johnson 2000; Hill, Martinson and Ferris 2004). Accordingly, mothers were further prompted on their thoughts about part-time work, and if it made it easier to balance work and family, to which one mother commented:

> I just felt it (part-time) didn't work. I felt I'd rather be paid 5 days, and be there doing it (work), then have days of being at home and trying to work… there is nothing more frustrating and self-destroying—getting paid 3 days and working 5 days a week. (Mother of 2, age 44, employed full-time).

Although approximately half the current sample was employed in part-time work, mothers tended to voice similar perspectives, in that they found themselves taking on almost similar workloads as full-time employees.

Availability of Support

The availability of organisations and family support was a common topic of discussion when mothers were queried about facilitating factors in achieving work–family balance. Extensive discussions were held regarding the impact of family-friendly policies. Many mothers expressed hesitancy about utilising policies that were already on offer at their organisations. Further discussions revealed that one reason for this was the concerns mothers had about being

perceived by co-workers as less committed to their work, and the potential impact on promotion opportunities. Nevertheless, some mothers did express having the privilege of working for family-supportive organisations, which was regarded as instrumental in alleviating stress levels.

> I had so little time, but then work let me leave earlier. Just leaving half hour earlier gave me a whole hour back in the afternoon, just getting out of peak hour traffic. So that really helped. (Mother of 2, age 34, employed full-time).

Similar to organisational support, mothers valued having support from their extended family, as one participant noted:

> My mum lives with us… that's why I get the benefit of her helping me with the kids, which she loves … so it works well. (Mother of 2, age 33 employed part time).

However, the level of family support mothers had access to varied considerably, and appeared related to levels of stress. Some mothers said they were privileged in having support from extended family members, whereas for others this was not the case. Where family support was absent, mothers reported additional pressures to resolve issues with their partner.

> We don't have really the support of a bigger family to ring and say "can you look after whatever?" So it's between the two of us to sort it out. (Mother of 3, age 41, employed part-time).

Being a Quality Parent

During focus groups, a commonly raised issue by mothers was the depleted level of patience that arose from the constant pressure to *'fight the clock'*. Most mothers stated that being '*short*' or impatient with their children, not only hampered parent–child interaction, but also intensified their feelings of guilt at being a good parent.

> I'm still not able to leave work behind and I become quite short (impatient); erm, attention span is probably not as long, and trying to focus on what my son is doing, erm yeah, and I guess with working so much, I do make compromises on the time that I do spend with him (son). (Single mother of 1, age 31, employed full-time).

Despite impatience being a drawback, the majority of mothers said that being a working parent made them more conscious of the need to spend quality time with their children:

> It (work) takes away your time so you don't get to see your kids as much as you'd like, and you feel quite tired with them during the week. But, because you feel like you're not spending quality time with them; on the weekends, I always make an effort to have special time with the kids. (Mother of 2, age 41, casual work).

Mothers also suggested that interventions should include specific parenting topics, such as, "programs should show us (parents) how to spend time, like ways to spend better quality time with your child" or "how to manage my temper tantrum toddler".

Finding Balance

Beyond the immediate nuclear family, some mothers also indicated they were the primary carers for their elderly parents. With an array of competing demands vying for parents' time and attention, *'feeling worn-out'* was a recurrent subject matter across focus groups. Mothers stated that having to constantly move from one duty to the next left them with no personal time, which they reported as negatively impacting their social life and couple time. Frequently, mothers felt that these were two aspects of their life that had to be sacrificed:

> I find that now socialising is a chore … it's not that I don't want to see them (friends)…but it's because of the kids and me and work. (Mother of 3, age 42, employed in casual work).

Impact on Couple Relationship

Mothers across all focus groups brought up issues surrounding their spousal relationship. Topics of discussion included: lack of date nights; poor communication; partner's having to travel for work, which often meant the other parent having to juggle work–family responsibilities by themselves:

> I begrudged him so much that he (husband) was in Sydney and he was there for work but he wasn't home and I kept thinking, I didn't sign up for this, this is not right. One night, I sent him a text which was a really horrible text and it said: 'it's time for you to get a new job or a new wife'… but it stimulated a lot of discussion for us which we really had to have. (Mother of 2, age 44, employed full-time).

Other mothers described their relationship with their partner as *'ships passing in the night'* or *'like housemates'* and others commented on the limited amount of time they spend together, for example:

> My husband and I haven't been out. I can't remember the last we've been out together, like we don't have date nights or anything." (Mother of 2, age 43, employed part-time) and "I probably spend more time

with the two blokes I work with than my own husband and family (Mother of 3, employed part time).

Having a Career Counts

Mothers in the study revealed that being in the workforce allowed for personal growth, as well as an opportunity for adult interaction. Within the literature, it has been noted that compared to parents who work to make ends meet, career-oriented parents, despite potentially taking on more work commitments (i.e., business travel and work events), were more likely to describe their lives as being fulfilled (Working Mothers Research Institute 2011). This was evident in the current study, for example:

> It (work) does give you that sense of, if I didn't have work in my life, I think I would miss that sense of achievement that I get at work because I can start things and finish things. (Mother of 2, age 42, employed full-time).

While some participants expressed a sense of satisfaction in having a highly successful career, other mothers expressed regret that this was not the case for them. Even among a sample of, career-minded mothers, it was reported that when faced with a career turning point, men's careers were often given more priority over women's careers:

> … it's very much expected that anything that comes up with the kids, I just have to pick up the pieces for. But I still have deadlines … I have to avoid a lot of work that might involve travel … so my earning has definitely gone down, but I'm at the stage at which, professionally, I could be 'flying'; because I've got the extra experience. (Mother of 2, age 39, self-employed).

Mothers also expressed the notion that their careers often came stagnated after starting a family, which was a source of disappointment for many. Furthermore, consistent with the previous theme on support, the absence of extended family support meant parents had limited alternative childcare arrangements. Hence, working mothers had to turn down prospects for business travel and other career advancement opportunities in order to provide stability for the household. Although mothers voiced that these choices as being necessary; they mentioned that it often caused permanent alternation to their career trajectory.

The Need for Low Intensity Programs

Mothers across all focus groups indicated that they would like to receive a parenting program tailored specifically to the needs of working parents. However, the majority of mothers did express desire for prospective programs to be; (a) shorter in duration, and (b) content-specific. When asked about factors that prevented parents from attending a parenting program, the most common response was time, for example:

> like how long it (program) is… like sometimes, I've wanted to go to seminars, but there's no childcare. Or I'd want to bring my husband along, but then who's going to look after the kids? (Mother of 2, age 38, employed full-time).

With regards to program length, mothers stated that practical barriers (e.g., childcare, time, and children's weekend activities) placed restrictions on their ability to attend intensive parenting programs. The second suggestion raised by mothers was for content-specific programs. Mothers offered a range of topics they would like further information on in order to better manage their roles as employees and parents. These included:

> Maybe how to deal with attitudes to you as a parent? Like judgemental attitudes and things like that. (Mother of 2, age 39, self-employed).

> For me, it'll be looking at building healthy relationships with your child or sort of how to improve that through play. Sounds really silly, but as a parent, learning how to play again, learning what developmentally your child needs to be doing and how you can mould that through play. (Mother of 1, 34, employed full-time).

Mothers had a preference for programs that were conducted with smaller rather than larger groups. Mothers felt that program delivery in a small group helped participants form better connections with other working parents. There was also a preference for online parenting interventions, as it generally offers greater flexibility and accessibility.

Discussion

The aim of this paper was to utilize a consumer informed approach to program design by ascertaining the views of working mothers. By doing so, this study was able to determine whether the existing Workplace Triple P program was congruent with the needs of working mothers, and identified areas that may require modification. Specific attention was given to mothers perceptions on: (a) facilitating and (b) inhibiting factors in achieving work–family balance, (c) intervention content, and (d) barriers that prevented parents' from accessing support services. Based on the focus groups with working mothers three key findings emerged that have important implications for program design and modification.

The first key finding was that working mothers indicated that they needed assistance with managing the boundaries

between work and family, and were receptive to workplace parenting support. The focus groups identified that many working mothers had difficulty in determining how much time they were allocating to work, to their family, and to other responsibilities such as caring for their elderly parents or social activities. The constant stress of meeting these responsibilities made working mothers feel guilty, as they indicated they always wanted to give more time to at least one of these aforementioned areas. Moreover, working parents felt there was nothing that they could do to relieve this guilt. Although there is already sufficient literature documenting the stress that working parents experience (Buonocore and Russo 2012; Vaananen et al. 2008), this is the first study to report that working mothers feel they can do nothing to mitigate their feelings of guilt. This has important implication for programs aiming to assist working parents. Specifically strategies should be included in programs to manage both family and workplace guilt, and evaluation studies should consider measuring guilt as primary outcome measure.

Secondly, mothers indicated wanting interventions that have practical strategies to assist with problem areas (e.g., guilt), whilst also promoting the positive role of being a working parent (e.g., having a career). Although participants viewed being a working parent positively, they did emphasise a desire to manage it better. This finding has implications for the engagement of working mothers in parenting programs, as currently the major focus of workplace programs are on strategies to enhance parenting or manage stress (Haslam et al. 2012). The emphasis on parenting and stress components in current interventions could potentially be a barrier for some working parents interested in accessing such a program, as working parents could possibly interpret their career as the reason for their problems. However, the results from this study indicated that working mothers viewed both being a parent and having a career has important. Thus, workplace parenting programs could look to include three key areas of focus, (a) parenting strategies, (b) strategies to manage stress and guilt, and (c) strategies to view career and work in a positive framework. Strategies, such as positive reminiscing (Buzzanell et al. 2005) on career achievements could be one potential strategy to help parents feel good about their career, whereas for non career focused parents focusing on the benefits of working for their family may be important.

Finally, working mothers indicated a desire for brief targeted interventions that do not require a significant time investment. These findings provide important data for program developers looking to enhance program participation and retention rates among working parents. Low intensity interventions are an area of emerging interest for clinicians and parenting researchers. Low intensity parenting interventions have been shown to be efficacious for parents in their parenting role in reducing dysfunctional parenting styles and child emotional and behavioral problems (Sanders et al. 2014) with some studies showing similar effect sizes from brief interventions as are obtained by intensive interventions (Morawska et al. 2011). Therefore, a workplace parenting program that is a 2-h seminar or a series of discussion groups focused on a specific topic (e.g., 'managing stress and guilt' or 'viewing your career positively) could be a beneficial for working parents.

Implications for Program Design and Refinement

Based on the obtained findings in the focus groups several recommendations can be made to the modification of existing workplace parenting interventions. These recommendations are also provided in Table 3. A key modification to current workplace parenting interventions is the inclusion of strategies to both recognise and manage guilt effectively. For example, interventions could include cognitive restructuring techniques that teach parents how to identify and replace the unhelpful thoughts that lead to feelings of guilt. Alternatively mindfulness-based acceptance techniques could help parents understand that their feelings of guilt do not need to be judged or evaluated. Secondly, the findings presented from this research suggest such interventions may benefit from incorporating a module and strategies focused on the positive aspects of working or having a career. These exercises should focus on the benefits of working in general (e.g., being a positive role model for children, financial benefits), making the intervention relevant to both career focused parents and parents working primarily for financial necessity. Finally, low-intensity, brief interventions are desired by working parents. Not all working parents will require the same level of support. Ideally, working parents should access the minimally sufficient amount of support to best help them manage their parenting and career effectively. As such, low intensity programs should be developed, such as brief discussion groups or large group seminars. These may be examples of easier programs to integrate into the working lives of busy parents. Table 3 outlines some of the key refinements should be considered based on the current data.

Strengths and Limitations

The use of Braun and Clarke's (2006) systematic process in analysing qualitative data for thematic analysis is one of the strengths to this study. Furthermore, as a precautionary measure against subjective and interpretation bias, a second coder examined the reliability of codes and a high inter-rater reliability was obtained. In addition, this is the first time that the views of working mothers have been directly accessed in order to design consumer informed programs for working parents. However the findings from this study should also be considered in view of its existing limitations. Firstly, the data

Table 3 Example of consumer input and parenting research informing program modification

Consumer input	Parenting research	Recommended modification/refinement
Parental guilt "… my mum's having to take them to school, and bring them back from school. And I feel bad, cuz [sic] I just see them (the children) in the morning and then just before they sleep"	Research offers support that balancing domestic and professional roles results in a dialectical dilemma reported as guilt or inadequacy (Guendouzi 2006)	Designing a module on setting realistic expectations. (e.g., setting realistic work goals, realistic household goals such as housekeeping and chores)
Getting the balance right "I find that now socialising is a chore … it's not that I don't want to see them (friends)…but it's because of the kids and me and work"	Consistent findings in the literature suggesting that working parents constantly experience conflict between their job demands and their desire to spend time in other domains of life (e.g., family life, social life) (Allen et al. 2000; Carlson and Kacmar 2000)	Time management (e.g., developing routines, setting aside fixed time to spend with your child)
Having a career counts "It (work) does give you that sense of, if I didn't have work in my life, I think I would miss that sense of achievement that I get at work because I can start things and finish things"	Role accumulation theory demonstrates that engagement in multiple roles has cumulative effects on parents' physical and psychological wellbeing, particularly when there is at least one high quality life domain (Greenhaus and Powell 2006)	Acknowledging the challenges and benefits entailed in being working parents, and including acceptance commitment therapy techniques to help working parents manage distressing situations that are not within their control
Need for low intensity programs	Substantially more research is finding that brief targeted interventions can have effect sizes as large as longer intensive interventions (Morawska et al. 2011)	Consider developing a briefer light-touch intervention for families with low levels of need

was collected with a small sample of convenience, as such the generalizability of the themes arising with this specific group of working mothers to the working parent population in general cannot be known. Secondly, although fathers were eligible to participate in the study the sample was comprised only of mothers. The themes identified therefore cannot be generalised to working fathers. It would be beneficial to conduct a similar research with more specific father engagement strategies to conduct a more representative sample. For example recruitment strategies could focus on male dominated fields or use eligibility criteria that requires the participation of both parents. Thirdly, a number of participants were unable to complete the focus groups contributing to the attrition of the current study. In future qualitative research accessing the views of these participants through the means of a phone interview rather than focus groups could potentially still enable for the views of the participants to be garnered. Finally, participants were drawn from a largely homogenous population with a lack of ethnic or socioeconomic diversity and a high level of educational attainment. Therefore, the application of this study's findings to other ethnically diverse populations and high-risk families cannot be made. A key focus for future research is to determine whether the themes obtained in the present sample of working mothers are also found across different populations of socioeconomic backgrounds, gender, and work types. This would provide a more comprehensive insight to the needs of working parents, and build on the preliminary findings obtained in this study. Additionally given that guilt was a major identified theme and that parents were under the impression that guilt could not be ameliorated more targeted research examining parents perceptions of guilt, what causes it and how it could potentially be reduced would be of interest.

Conclusions

This qualitative study has provided rich data to the work–family literature about the challenges working mothers face and their preferences for parenting support. The extracted themes provide insight for program developers, specifically the importance of focussing on areas of strength and having practical strategies that can be taught in a time efficient, content specific manner. A number of refinements to the existing WPTP intervention have been suggested in response to the data gathered with particular focus being places on brief, targeted intervention.

Conflict of interest The Triple P—Positive Parenting Program is owned by The University of Queensland (UQ). The University through its main technology transfer company, UniQuest Pty Ltd, has licensed Triple P International Pty Ltd to publish and disseminate the program worldwide. Royalties stemming from published Triple P resources are distributed to the Faculty of Health and Behavioural Sciences at UQ, Parenting and Family Support Centre, School of Psychology at UQ, and contributory authors. No author has any share or ownership in Triple P International Pty Ltd. Haslam is an author of Workplace Triple P and Kirby is an author of Grandparent Triple P. Authors Haslam and Kirby are employed by The University of Queensland.

Appendix

See Table 4.

Table 4 Complete set of identified codes and themes

Theme 1 The impact of guilt	Theme 2 Crossover effects of work on family	Theme 3 Availability of support	Theme 4 Being a quality parent	Theme 5 Getting the balance right	Theme 6 Impact on couple relationship	Theme 7 Having a career counts	Theme 8 The need for low intensity programs
The pressure to get things done	Highly stressful and demanding jobs	The desire for family support	Preoccupation about work depletes parents' patience	Needing to sacrifice social life to balance work and family	Recognising the need for couple time	The role of being a working parent fosters a sense of achievement	Specific, content-driven programs
Experiencing parental guilt	Time and resource constraints	The desire for more organisational support	Recognising that quality time is more important than quantity	The added demands of being a single parent	Learning to "pick your battles"	Financial stability as a working parent	Programs with flexible content delivery formats
Perception of being judged by others	The constant need to integrate work responsibilities with family life	Unrealistic portrayal that working parents are "able to do it all on their own"	Having a routine helps with being a quality parent	Caring for an elderly dependent	Potential Negative impact on couple relationship	"Work as opposed to having a career"—concerning for working mothers	The need for evidence-based programs
Experiencing work guilt	Economic climate creating job uncertainty					Makes parents and children more resilient	Time and resource constraints prevents parents from attending a parenting program
Self-doubt							The need for both parents to be involved in programs
Not feeling guilty about being working parents							Working parents wanting contact with other working parents

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