

Time Well Spent: Rethinking Parental Investments Through the Lens of Presence and Cash Transfers

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July 2025

Abstract

This study examines how an unconditional cash transfer reshaped low-income parents' experiences of time and caregiving, focusing on the emergence of *presence-centered parenting*, a caregiving approach grounded in emotional attunement, relational connection, and everyday co-regulation. Drawing on six waves of qualitative interviews with 117 parents participating in a randomized controlled trial, we identify four key mechanisms through which the cash transfer supported parents' ability to be present with their children: (1) reduced financial stress that freed up cognitive and emotional bandwidth for caregiving; (2) work flexibility that allowed parents to reclaim time and reconfigure routines around caregiving priorities; (3) investments in parental well-being that enhanced emotional availability and responsive parenting; and (4) expenditures on shared experiences that deepened relational bonds. Our findings challenge dominant frameworks that prioritize structured, future-oriented parental investments by highlighting the importance of informal, relational time investments that foster emotional security and connection. This work offers a new conceptual lens for understanding how parental time use shifts under conditions of constraint and relief, with direct implications for social policies aimed at supporting the relational and emotional dimensions of caregiving in low-income families.

Acknowledgements: Many people were instrumental in the success of this project. The program we study, and the associated research, were supported by generous private funders, and we thank the non-profit organizations that implemented the program. Conducting nearly 900 interviews would not have been possible without the invaluable contributions of Elizabeth Proehl, Tess Cotter, Rashad Dixon, and the dedicated interviewers and staff at the University of Michigan's Survey Research Operations, under the leadership of Karin Schneider. Sandra Smith, a member of the study advisory board and a principal investigator on the qualitative sub-study, provided instrumental input in developing the research and incorporating findings from earlier rounds into future interview protocols. In addition to her role as an interviewer, Elizabeth Proehl led operations, assisted with interviewer training, and contributed to every aspect of the project from its inception through the fourth round of interviews. Patrick Krause, Aristia Kinis, and Joshua Lin were invaluable contributors through their work at OpenResearch. We are grateful for the feedback received throughout the project from numerous researchers and members of our advisory board. We are especially thankful to Sigrid Luhr for her thoughtful feedback on earlier versions of this draft. This study was approved by the Advarra Institutional Review Board (IRB).

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1 Introduction

Contemporary parenting in the United States is marked by a fundamental tension. While caregiving requires significant time and emotional availability, many parents—especially those with low incomes—face persistent structural barriers that constrain their ability to spend time with their children in ways they value most (Daly, 2001; Bianchi et al., 2012; Sullivan, 2018; Cooper, 2020). Time poverty, defined not only as a lack of available time but also as the experience of time as inflexible, fragmented, and unpredictable, has emerged as a critical yet under-examined dimension of inequality in parenting (Harvey and Mukhopadhyay, 2007; Passias et al., 2017). Although time poverty affects families across the socioeconomic spectrum, its consequences are most acutely felt by low-income parents, particularly mothers and single caregivers, whose caregiving is often evaluated against dominant norms of parental investment that assume ample time and resources.

Much existing research and policy discourse continues to frame low-income parenting through a deficit lens, interpreting the absence of structured enrichment or academic support as a failure of intention rather than a reflection of constraint (Lister, 1996; Gillies, 2006). Yet a growing body of work highlights how low-income parents actively navigate scarcity of both time and money to care for their children in meaningful ways (Roy et al., 2004; Randles, 2021). This paper builds on and extends that work by examining how an unconditional cash transfer reshaped parents’ experiences of time and engagement in caregiving.

Leveraging an exogenous increase in income provided through a randomized controlled trial (RCT), we draw on six waves of qualitative interviews with 117 low-income parents to examine how recipients used temporary cash transfers to address time poverty and invest more deeply in their children. We show that beyond enabling some parents to increase the quantity of time they spent with their children, the transfer fundamentally transformed the quality of caregiving time for many others. Specifically, the transfer allowed parents to engage in what we term *presence-centered parenting*: a caregiving orientation grounded in emotional attunement, connection, and co-regulation in everyday life. These time investments are often informal, unscheduled, and relational—distinct from the structured enrichment activities emphasized in dominant parenting models.

Our analysis identifies four interrelated mechanisms through which the cash transfer supported presence-centered parenting: reduced financial stress, increased work flexibility, financial investments in parental well-being, and financial and temporal investments in shared experiences. These mechanisms

fall into two broad categories. First, reduced financial stress functioned as an enabling condition, alleviating structural constraints and freeing up cognitive and emotional bandwidth for caregiving. Second, parents made a range of intentional investments that either indirectly or directly enhanced caregiving. Indirect investments, such as seeking more flexible work arrangements or addressing mental and physical health needs, expanded parents’ capacity to be emotionally and physically available. Direct investments, such as outings, family meals, or other shared experiences that families could not have otherwise afforded, created opportunities for relational connection. Together, these mechanisms illuminate how the transfer not only removed barriers but also enabled parents to actively choose presence-centered parenting.

By centering presence as a meaningful and purposeful form of parental care, this paper contributes a new conceptual framework for understanding caregiving under varying constraints and supports. It also challenges prevailing policy assumptions about low-income parenting, arguing for social programs that recognize and bolster the relational, time-based care parents value.

2 Background

2.1 Time as an (Unequal) Resource

Parental time is a critical resource for children’s development. Research consistently demonstrates that both quantity and quality of parental time shape children’s cognitive, emotional, and behavioral outcomes, with quality interactions often exerting a stronger influence (Gershoff et al., 2007). One-on-one engagement with children fosters greater parental responsiveness (Crouter and Crowley, 1990), boosts children’s self-esteem (Lam et al., 2012), and strengthens emotional bonds between parents and children (Ginsburg, 2007). Time investments support children’s social-emotional well-being (Wikle et al., 2019; Wikle and Hoagland, 2020; Farrant and Zubrick, 2013), academic achievement (Gould et al., 2020), and intergenerational mobility (Li and Guo, 2023; El Nokali et al., 2010; Yum, 2023).

Drawing on Bowlby’s Attachment Theory (1982), studies show that consistent parental presence cultivates secure attachment, which supports emotional regulation and resilience (Ainsworth, 1979). Warm, supportive interactions reduce risks of anxiety, depression, and behavioral problems in children (Conger et al., 2010). Similarly, parental involvement in schoolwork significantly improves academic outcomes, particularly among children in low-income families (Kalil et al., 2012). Structured family activities, such as shared meals, religious participation, and organized sports, are associated with lower rates of youth delinquency and substance use (Crouter and McHale, 2005; Breining et al., 2020).

Despite the well-documented importance of time, stark disparities in parents' ability to invest time in children persist (Kalil and Ryan, 2020). Time investments are shaped by parental income and education, with lower-income parents facing greater constraints (Gauthier et al., 2004; Monna and Gauthier, 2008; Guryan et al., 2008; Hill and Stafford, 1974). Whereas high-income families can outsource domestic labor and purchase flexibility, low-income parents must navigate chronic structural constraints that restrict opportunities for relational investments in children (Goodin et al., 2005; Hochschild, 1997; Lareau, 2003). These time constraints represent a critical yet often overlooked dimension of parenting inequality.

2.2 The Dynamics of Time Poverty

While time inequality reflects broad disparities, the concept of time poverty offers a more precise lens for understanding how constraints shape the nature of parents' time. Time poverty is typically conceptualized as a lack of sufficient, flexible, and predictable time to meet essential personal, social, and family needs (Vickery, 1977; Aas, 1982; Goodin et al., 2005). For parents, time poverty arises from the competing demands of employment, caregiving, and basic household maintenance (Harvey and Mukhopadhyay, 2007; Douthitt, 2000; Bittman, 2002).

Although time poverty is experienced across the socioeconomic spectrum, its sources and consequences differ sharply by income. Middle- and higher-income parents may feel time pressure due to overscheduling or competitive demands, but they often retain greater flexibility and can outsource time-consuming tasks (Milkie et al., 2015). In contrast, low-income parents face a more acute, survival-driven form of time poverty shaped by structural constraints, including irregular work hours, precarious employment, long commutes, and inadequate childcare (Luhr et al., 2022; Henly and Lambert, 2014; Presser and Ward, 2011; Daly, 2001; Craig and Brown, 2017; Roy et al., 2004). They also devote significant time and ingenuity to meeting children's basic needs (Randles, 2021).

These dynamics are captured by the Family Stress Model, which outlines how economic and time-related pressures produce psychological distress, disrupting parenting behaviors and relational quality (Conger et al., 1994; Masarik and Conger, 2017). Financial and temporal strain often result in emotional spillover, where stress in one domain (e.g., work or finances) interferes with functioning in another (e.g., caregiving). The outcome can be increased irritability, emotional withdrawal, or inconsistent responsiveness, which in turn reduce the warmth, stability, and attunement children need. This aligns with research showing that parental well-being is closely tied to emotional availability (Liu et al., 2023), and that ongoing financial strain, solo caregiving, and demanding work schedules can erode the

emotional capacity that responsive parenting requires (Hochschild, 1989; Coltrane, 2000; Owens, 2018; Office of the Surgeon General, 2024).

Recent work in developmental psychology and neuroscience further emphasizes that emotional attunement, regulation, and responsiveness are central to effective parenting. Scholars such as Kennedy (2022) and Siegel and Bryson (2021) show that children’s neural pathways associated with self-regulation, empathy, and problem-solving develop in the context of emotionally secure and responsive relationships. In this light, time poverty is not simply a logistical constraint; it is a developmental risk factor that compromises parents’ ability to offer the emotionally grounded care that supports resilience, trust, and long-term well-being.

2.3 Parental Investments

While time poverty research illuminates the structural barriers low-income parents face, dominant frameworks of parental investment approach these dynamics from a different angle, conceptualizing parenting through the lens of economic investment. A large body of research shows that parents invest both time and money to secure institutional, economic, or educational advantages for their children (e.g., Bennett et al., 2012; Bianchi et al., 2004; Kornrich and Furstenberg, 2012; Hango, 2007; Snellman et al., 2015). Economic models, most notably Becker’s Family Investment Theory (1981; 1993), conceptualize parenting as a rational allocation of time and resources aimed at maximizing children’s human capital. These models sharply distinguish between “investment” and “consumption,” defining expenditures as investments only to the extent that they enhance a child’s future productivity. As a result, time is often evaluated through a monetary lens and devalued when not directly compensated—such as caregiving, leisure, or volunteer work.

Lareau’s (2003) research on parental time allocation shows that middle-class parents often practice “concerted cultivation,” filling children’s schedules with structured activities aimed at skill building and institutional advantage. Working-class parents, in contrast, tend to follow a “natural growth” model that allows children more unstructured time—an approach often misinterpreted as parental disengagement rather than a response to structural constraints. Historically, these frameworks have reinforced deficit narratives by assessing low-income parenting behavior against middle-class norms and overlooking alternative models of care and investment (Lewis, 1980; Gillies, 2006).

More recent scholarship has begun to contest these assumptions, documenting the resilience, ingenuity, and relational labor of low-income parents (Randles, 2021; Verduzco-Baker, 2017). These studies show how many parents, especially mothers, prioritize emotional support, family ties, and community-

based learning as core developmental strategies (Tubbs et al., 2005). This orientation reflects not a lack of effort but a different logic of investment—one shaped by time scarcity, resource constraints, and the high value placed on connection and presence.

2.4 Cash Transfer Programs and Parenting

Within this context of evolving understandings of parental investment, cash transfer programs have emerged as a unique opportunity to examine how increased financial resources shape caregiving practices and time use. The Baby’s First Years study found that even modest unconditional monthly payments increased low-income mothers’ engagement in cognitively stimulating activities (e.g., reading and playing) without reducing employment or childcare use (Shah et al., 2025; Gennetian et al., 2024). Similarly, Akee et al.(2018; 2010) found that increased income from tribal casino dividends improved parent-child interactions and overall child outcomes, attributing the change primarily to enhanced parental quality and engagement. These studies suggest that income affects not only how much time parents have, but also how they experience and use it. Relatedly, Del Boca et al.(2014) find that both maternal and paternal time are important determinants of children’s cognitive development, especially in early childhood, emphasizing the significance of both the quantity and quality of parental time.

In contrast, earnings-conditioned supports like the Earned Income Tax Credit tend to increase maternal labor force participation while reducing total time at home (Bastian and Lochner, 2022; Agostinelli and Sorrenti, 2021). Even so, these studies show that parents protect high-value caregiving time by reducing leisure or household work. Morrissey (2023) similarly finds that a \$1 increase in the minimum wage was associated with a slight increase in time spent with children on weekends as well as total time with children, suggesting some gains in family time despite greater work demands. Together, these findings illustrate the tradeoffs induced by work-conditioned benefits and the lengths to which parents go to preserve time. Whether reallocating existing hours or reinvesting additional income, parents work to preserve or enhance the quality and quantity of time spent together.

However, much of this research relies on data from time diaries, which struggle to capture the complexity of family interactions and the relational dimensions of caregiving (Monna and Gauthier, 2008; Folbre, 2006). The dominant quantitative designs in this literature similarly offer limited insight into the underlying mechanisms through which parents make decisions about time and caregiving in response to financial change. A notable exception is the evaluation of the Magnolia Mother’s Trust, a Mississippi-based pilot that provides \$1,000 per month in unconditional cash to low-income Black mothers (Social Insights, 2024). Using a mixed-methods approach that included case studies and semi-

structured interviews, the evaluation found that parents not only spent more time with their children but were also more emotionally present in those interactions.

3 Contributions

This study introduces presence-centered parenting as a conceptual framework for understanding how caregiving unfolds under varying conditions of constraint and support. Grounded in emotional attunement, relational connection, and co-regulation, presence-centered parenting reflects a caregiving logic that prioritizes shared time, emotional availability, and everyday interaction over structured enrichment or institutional engagement. For the parents in our study, these practices—expressed through routines, conversation, and moments of connection—were not incidental but central to how they understood and enacted care. At the same time, the expression of presence-centered parenting was shaped by structural conditions. Financial strain, unstable work schedules, and limited childcare made it difficult for many parents to sustain emotionally responsive caregiving, even when they valued it deeply. The cash transfer temporarily alleviated these pressures for some, expanding both their sense of agency and their capacity for relational care.

We extend existing frameworks in several ways. First, our findings challenge dominant economic models that narrowly define caregiving in terms of time and money aimed at enhancing children’s future productivity. We expand this frame by showing how low-income parents invest in their children through emotional presence, stress reduction, and relational care—forms of labor often overlooked in frameworks that privilege market productivity and human capital accumulation.

Second, we contribute to the Family Stress Model by conceptualizing parental well-being not just as an outcome but as a form of investment. Actions like accessing therapy, improving health, or leaving unsafe environments directly enhanced caregiving capacity.

Third, drawing on both participant narratives and existing theory, we identify the mechanisms through which an unconditional cash transfer supported presence-centered parenting. Reduced financial stress alleviated cognitive and emotional burdens, and additional indirect investments (e.g., work flexibility and parental well-being) and direct investments (e.g., shared experiences) allowed parents to reclaim, reconfigure, and revalue caregiving time.

Finally, this work offers direct policy implications. Too often, social programs targeting low-income families rely on deficit-based assumptions and emphasize formal, measurable behaviors tied to middle-class norms. Our findings show that when given unconditional financial support, many parents

prioritized relational caregiving that nurtured their children’s emotional well-being. Presence-centered parenting is not simply a style of caregiving—it is a relational practice that depends on time, material stability, and emotional capacity. Its expression is shaped not only by personal values but by structural conditions. Recognizing and resourcing this form of care is essential to building a more inclusive understanding of how families nurture and invest.

4 Methodology and Data

4.1 Study Context

The present study was conducted as part of the OpenResearch Unconditional Cash Transfer Study, a large-scale mixed-methods randomized controlled trial (RCT) that enrolled 3,000 individuals from large urban, medium urban, suburban, and rural counties in Texas and Illinois. Eligibility criteria limited participation to individuals aged 21-40 whose total household income did not exceed 300% of the federal poverty threshold. Following enrollment and baseline data collection, 1,000 participants were randomly assigned to receive \$1,000 per month for three years, while a control group of 2,000 participants received \$50 per month.¹ (For more information about the RCT design and outcomes, see Krause et al. (2025), Miller et al. (2024), Broockman et al. (2024), Bartik et al. (2024), and Vivalt et al. (2024).)

4.2 Qualitative Sample

Participants for the qualitative sample were drawn from the full study sample, with a majority selected from the treatment group to provide in-depth insight into how recipients experienced and understood the role of the cash transfer in their lives. We began by purposefully narrowing the qualitative study to focus on participants from two baseline income groups and a range of neighborhood contexts, based on the hypothesis that both income and place could mediate the effects of the cash transfer. We then divided the full sample into four strata based on household income and neighborhood opportunity

¹While time use data was collected as part of the larger study, we did not observe large or consistent differences in reported time spent with children between treatment and control groups (Krause et al., 2025). However, Krause et al. (2025) report suggestive evidence of increased parental engagement in activities such as attending school meetings and parent-teacher conferences, particularly among parents of children ages 5 to 10, and note a potential increase in time spent with family within this subgroup. These effects were modest and did not remain statistically significant after adjusting for multiple comparisons, but they point toward subtle shifts in parental involvement. As Krause et al. acknowledge, parenting time is notoriously difficult to capture through standard survey instruments, given that care often occurs simultaneously with other tasks or takes passive forms such as supervision and availability (Monna and Gauthier, 2008; Folbre, 2006). One participant in our qualitative sample similarly noted that the time diary app failed to capture moments of connection with his son. Our qualitative findings help illuminate how parents restructured their time and attention toward their children in ways that are meaningful but difficult to measure quantitatively, offering interpretive depth to the suggestive patterns observed in the survey data.

scores (see Figure 1).

Specifically, we identified two income groups at baseline: participants whose household income was below the federal poverty threshold and participants whose household income was between 100% and 175% of the poverty threshold. Though still low income, the latter group is often ineligible for many forms of public assistance. Neighborhood opportunity levels were derived from the Child Opportunity Index 2.0—a composite of 29 indicators at the Census tract level that characterize the available educational, health and environmental, and social and economic resources (Noelke et al., 2020). After defining these strata, we randomly selected participants within each group to compose the final qualitative sample, stratifying by treatment status to ensure sufficient representation of the treatment group. The final sample included 156 individuals, 75% of whom were parents (see Table 1 for summary statistics).

4.3 Data Collection

We conducted six rounds of semi-structured interviews with the qualitative sample between July 2020 and July 2025 (see Table 2 for study timeline). The majority of baseline interviews occurred after participants were assigned to the treatment group but before they were notified about the \$1,000 monthly cash transfers. Subsequent interviews took place approximately every six months (see Table 2). All interviews were conducted by phone to accommodate participants’ geographic dispersion and logistical flexibility.

Drawing on Charmaz’s concept of intensive interviewing—“focusing the topic while providing the interactive space and time to enable participants’ views and insights to emerge” (2014, pg. 85)—our protocols evolved across waves, informed by ongoing analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data. The baseline interview covered domains including living situation, employment, time use, stress and subjective well-being, physical and mental health, social networks and relational supports, parenting practices, child well-being, values and goals, civic engagement, and financial security. Our aim at baseline was to understand participants’ pre-intervention experiences in these domains. Subsequent interviews revisited these topics while also probing how participants experienced and interpreted the cash transfer. The fifth round of interviews, conducted near the end of the transfer period, focused on participants’ reflections about the transfer’s impact and their expectations for the period that would follow. The sixth and final round, conducted after the transfer had ended, centered on changes participants experienced after the transfer ceased.

Each interview averaged approximately two hours. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed,

and participants received \$50 compensation per interview. Response rates remained high across rounds: 100% at baseline, 94% at round two, 95% at round three, 94% at round four, and 87% at round five. Round six interviews are ongoing.

4.4 Analysis

We analyzed interview data using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), an approach well-suited to identifying patterns of meaning across a large corpus of qualitative material. Analysis was supported by MaxQDA, a qualitative and mixed-methods data analysis software. Our analytic process was iterative and inductive. We conducted multiple close readings of transcripts, emphasizing participants’ meaning-making practices and the structural conditions shaping their narratives. Throughout data collection and analysis, we wrote analytic memos to document emerging themes, recurrent language, and evolving theoretical insights.

This memoing process informed the identification of key patterns across cases—for example, how parents described navigating time poverty, reallocating caregiving time, and restructuring their emotional energy toward children following receipt of the cash transfer. We paid close attention to how participants narrated shifts in parenting practices, articulated trade-offs between work and family responsibilities, and framed their aspirations and constraints. Rather than aiming to quantify frequency, our goal was to understand the underlying logics of care, constraint, and relational investment shaping parents’ strategies.

Throughout the analysis, we drew on theoretical constructs such as time poverty and emotional presence, allowing these concepts to guide interpretation while remaining grounded in participants’ language and experiences. We examined variation across family structure, caregiving demands, and pre-transfer circumstances to understand how structural inequalities shaped parents’ ability to convert financial relief into time wealth. The process was iterative, involving repeated movement between data and theory, continuous memoing, ongoing discussion, and close comparative reading across cases.

5 Findings

The cash transfer supported presence-centered parenting through a set of interrelated mechanisms that both expanded parents’ capacity and deepened relational connections. Reduced financial stress from the cash transfer functioned as an enabling condition, freeing up cognitive and emotional bandwidth. Additional indirect investments, such as seeking more flexible work or addressing mental and physical health needs, expanded parents’ capacity to be present. Direct investments on outings, shared meals,

and time spent in unstructured interaction deepened relational bonds. Together, these mechanisms allowed parents to reclaim time, reduce cognitive and emotional strain, and engage in emotionally attuned caregiving practices.

5.1 Reduced Financial Stress

A foundational enabling condition for presence-centered parenting was a reduction in financial stress that reshaped families' capacity for caregiving. Consistent with the Family Stress Model, the additional income helped parents meet immediate needs, such as rent, food, and transportation, thereby reducing cognitive overload and emotional strain. Although this shift did not eliminate stress or measurably increase free time, it transformed the nature and intensity of stress in ways that allowed some parents to redirect mental and emotional energy toward caregiving. As one mother remarked, "It's one less stress... financial stress isn't necessary. It's more social, emotional stress now, I think that I have to worry about."

At baseline, Nikki—a mother of two—compared financial stress to an ever-present browser window playing audio you can't mute:

If you open your browser, and you got like 30 windows open... and one of them is playing music and you don't know which one it is, but it's driving you nuts. Well, it would be like the window that's responsible for financial stress. It's like it's always there. It's always low grade and you just have to manage it.

This metaphor captures how financial stress operates as a constant cognitive drain. Virginia, a mother of four, described the transformative effect of this relief:

When the stress level goes down, the mental capacity opens up. You have more room. You just literally have more mental space to think and just having more space to think actually lowers your stress, too... being comfortable, feeling safe, not worrying about little freaking crap freed up my mind to be more present for them.

For Virginia, this cognitive relief became the most significant impact of the transfer: "That is probably the biggest part of all of it for me. The fact that it freed up my mind so much... there were so many things that I just didn't have to even worry about anymore." She recounted how even seemingly small worries had consumed mental energy:

The cost of socks is not a thing that I had to worry about over the last three years, and it's freed up some mental space. Honestly, it's probably... and I'm a little emotional just thinking that this might be true that, uh, money frees up mental health maybe.

Olivia echoed this pattern, describing how reduced financial anxiety created space for family connection and overall well-being:

Having that extra money helped us realize how much of an impact money makes on happiness and anxiety, because I didn't have to deal with as much anxiety and I was able to balance things a little bit more with my family. I was able to keep more of a healthy balance...having the comfort of being able to think about our overall health.

Reflecting on the broader link between financial stability and well-being, she concluded, "They say money doesn't bring happiness, but money does bring health, and health does bring happiness."

Kyle's experience further illustrates how cognitive relief from financial stress supported more present parenting. At baseline, this single father of three described how financial stress disrupted his sleep and focus: "I do have trouble sleeping...it's harder to turn your brain off at times when you're just trying to work through a situation in your head and internalize it versus spilling it out for everybody else to deal with." One recurring source of anxiety was making paychecks stretch to avoid penalties: "Trying to make it last for the month...to avoid late fees, and all these extra charges that happen cause they typically hit you when you don't have money." He recalled the strain of juggling bills, COVID-era child care gaps, and an unpredictable work schedule—where even a single missed shift due to a sick child could upend the entire month. As he put it, he often found himself facing "more month than money."

The cash transfer provided Kyle with a crucial buffer. "That first month was definitely like that breath of fresh air," he told us, noting that it helped him stop daily creditor calls and catch up on overdue utility bills. By his fourth interview, he described his stress as "minimum...it's there, but it's not overwhelming to the point where I can't handle it or feel like giving up on it." With greater financial stability, Kyle no longer needed to take on "another full-time job" and could instead remain at home, saving on daycare costs and reclaiming time for his children. When asked how his parenting had changed since the transfer, he replied: "Just at home, being active, engaging with the kids—homework, any projects they had...being able to be more aware and present." By reducing financial stress, the transfer freed up Kyle's mental and emotional bandwidth for caregiving.

5.2 Work Flexibility

Beyond reducing financial stress, the transfer enabled many parents to restructure their work lives in ways that reclaimed time for caregiving. Though these decisions varied by household structure and access to other income, the added financial support created flexibility for some parents to reduce hours, decline promotions, leave stressful jobs, or temporarily exit the workforce, prioritizing time with children over maximizing income.

For Sophia, the cash transfer provided a unique opportunity to balance her roles as a full-time

student, part-time worker, and single mother of five. During her baseline interview, she described the tension between needing to work and the desire to remain present for her children. After losing her job during the pandemic she began applying for jobs, but available positions were second- and third-shift jobs that would severely cut into her time with her children. “In that second shift... if my kids are in school, that’s my main time with them,” she noted. “Being a single parent, I know a lot of people do it, but I’m not going to be one of those that loses that time with the kids.” Sophia saw this time with her children as a critical window to guide them: “I’ve got to steer them through this time because I only have a short period to guide them before they make mistakes and have to deal with them in other ways.”

Many participants emphasized how their struggles with time were shaped not only by how much time they had, but by how much control they had over when that time occurred. Precarious work schedules marked by fluctuating hours, limited autonomy, and rigid employer expectations posed a significant barrier to sustained caregiving.

With the transfer providing a financial cushion, Sophia secured a part-time position. “The money from this program has helped to put me in that position,” she shared. “Otherwise I’d probably be working two jobs and really be missing out with my kids.” This greater work flexibility allowed Sophia to show up for each of her children in ways that matched their distinct needs: advocating for her youngest son with dyslexia, supporting her oldest son through mental health treatment, carving out regular coffee dates with her middle son, and creating shared bonding experiences — like intentionally setting aside time with her teenage daughter to watch her daughter’s favorite show. As she put it, her children “became more relaxed because mom’s not so stressed and mom’s here more.”

Reflecting on the transfer at its end, Sophia revealed that her greatest benefit from the program was the increased time with her children:

It really helped to have that extra income coming in consistently while I was going to school, and allow me to work part-time and go to school full-time, and maintain—’cause I’m a single mom. It allowed me to balance more and focus more on my kids and everything.

While Sophia gained more time with her children, Rochelle’s narrative demonstrates how the transfer allowed parents to choose work arrangements that supported their emotional capacity for caregiving, even when the quantity of time remained unchanged. A single mother of three, Rochelle described her low-stress job as a form of psychological recovery that enhanced the quality of her time with her children. Compared to both prior employment and full-time parenting, work became a space to recharge: “I go to work for escaping. Like the way I don’t have nobody saying mommy this, mommy

that. It just I'm in my own zone...My job is my vacation (laughs)." This time to decompress made her more emotionally available at home: "Less stress, I don't have headaches. I just have...just makes me a better person for the kids...I have more time to play with them and things that they enjoy. I make time."

When offered a promotion to a supervisory position, Rochelle turned it down, knowing the additional stress would compromise her emotional presence at home. The cash transfer made this choice financially feasible, allowing her to maintain a work-life rhythm that prioritized her availability to her children.

5.2.1 Trade-Offs

For some parents, the decision to shift time away from paid work toward caregiving brought emotional complexity and lingering doubt. Time is a finite resource, and prioritizing caregiving often entails significant financial sacrifice. Nathan, a single father of a 4¹/₂-year-old son, made an immediate decision upon learning he would receive the transfer:

The moment that they told me [I was getting \$1,000 a month]...I cut my hours at work and spent all of that time with my son. I didn't even get the money yet and I was done...I saw the time and opportunity.

Rather than saving the transfer or accumulating assets, Nathan chose to invest in time—being present with his son. That choice was deeply rooted in his own childhood experience of an emotionally distant father. "I only saw my dad every other weekend, and sometimes on holidays," he recalled. In contrast, Nathan spent nearly every non-school moment with his son, teaching him skills like hunting, fishing, gardening, and fixing cars. "My son and me...it's a pretty good relationship, and that's real cool and it's noticed by a lot of other people around me," he shared. "That's like...the coolest life accomplishment I have." For Nathan, as for many others in our study, reclaiming time was not simply about presence but about strengthening the parent-child bond.

Still, the decision came at a cost. What he gained in emotional connection with his son he sacrificed in financial security—a trade-off he continued to grapple with: "If I could do it again, holy shit, I'd do it differently." Yet even expressing regret, his conviction remained. "I look back and...I spent it on time. And you know what? That's not horse shit. Like my time's worth everything...I can never get it back."

Nadia, another single parent, used the transfer to reduce her work hours from 60 per week to 35, allowing her to better support her son, who had fallen behind academically during the pandemic. "I

go to his parent-teacher conference for his teacher to tell me he's way behind in school... It was very overwhelming. I was working like 60 hours a week. I ended up cutting my hours down in like half, 35 hours," she recalled. With a lighter schedule, Nadia established a consistent after-school routine, reading with her son and helping him with homework.

In the final year of the transfer, however, she was offered a managerial position at the store where she worked. The new role came with higher pay and benefits but required her to return to 60+ hour workweeks. With the transfer ending soon, Nadia accepted. She observed the impact on her son almost immediately:

He's been giving me a hard time lately... I have to take some of the focus off of him cause I'm working more hours at work, instead of being home... When I work too much, there are times where you notice that it's wearing on him too because he is not getting that time.

Reflecting in her final interview, Nadia described the temporary period of control the cash transfer afforded her: "I got to decide my workload for a while." Nathan's and Nadia's stories illustrate a broader tension faced by many low-income parents—what scholars term the time–money squeeze (Kalleberg, 2011; Schneider and Harknett, 2019; Gershuny, 2000), wherein caregiving and financial security are often mutually exclusive.

5.2.2 Work Flexibility for Families with High-Needs Children

Among parents raising children with chronic health conditions, behavioral challenges, or disabilities, work flexibility became particularly crucial for enabling the physical and emotional presence these children required. What disability scholars call intensified caregiving (Kittay, 1999; Landsman, 2009) requires not only more time but greater emotional labor, planning, and advocacy within often fragmented and unsupportive systems.

Dana, a mother of two boys (ages 10 and 5 at baseline), exemplifies the compounded strain of intensified caregiving under economic precarity. Her older son had been diagnosed with a mood disorder that triggered episodes of intense sadness and anger. Like other parents of high-needs children in our sample, Dana emphasized the need to stay closely attuned to her children's emotional landscapes. One son needed her to stay and talk when upset; the other needed space. "They're totally different," she shared. "I would like to be doin' the right thing when they need me." What constrained Dana wasn't a lack of parenting knowledge or motivation—as deficit theories often imply—but a lack of capacity.

Dana's capacity for individualized emotional care was undermined by the instability of juggling four different gig jobs while attending school. The cognitive load and time fragmentation left her

“always running around” and “rarely home.” The cash transfer provided crucial breathing room; Dana transitioned to a single, stable job that aligned with her caregiving responsibilities. As her stress subsided, she described “closer communication” and greater emotional openness with her children, highlighting the reciprocal dynamics of emotional presence.

Similarly, when Maisie’s youngest son received an autism diagnosis during the second year of the transfer period, the added financial stability enabled her to work fewer hours and be more emotionally present for his treatment: “Getting that extra money allowed me to spend more time with him and to stay home while all these therapists came and worked with him.” This active involvement bolstered her son’s self-esteem and development, leaving Maisie feeling both fulfilled and proud in her parenting role. She told us:

It makes you proud when they catch on to something new and you know, you can see that they’re proud of themselves and get some self-esteem. And that makes me feel good to know that I had the ability to help them with that.

5.2.3 Household Structure and Differential Access to Flexibility

While single parents were able to adjust their work schedules, some partnered parents had greater flexibility to stop working altogether. Prior to receiving the transfer, Haley worked as a first-grade teacher while raising her five-year-old daughter with her partner in Texas. Although she valued her job, she expressed dissatisfaction with the limited time she had with her child: “I would like to lessen the amount of time [my daughter] spends in her after-school program...I just wish I had more time with her.”

When combined with her husband’s income, the transfer provided Haley with the financial cushion to reorient her work-life balance. She initially explored alternative employment options but ultimately left the workforce altogether after giving birth to her second child. “I knew I wanted to stay at home, so as soon as I started receiving this money...I immediately started setting it aside,” she recounted. “It definitely made it an easier decision financially to stay at home.”

These findings align with prior research on work-family conflict documenting how gender and family structure shape parents’ ability to balance employment and caregiving (Hochschild, 1989; Blair-Loy and DeHart, 2003; Blair-Loy and Jacobs, 2003). Single mothers like Sophia and Nadia were able to reduce their work hours, but financial pressures required them to remain in the labor force. In contrast, some partnered parents like Haley had greater financial and logistical flexibility, making it possible to exit the workforce entirely. This disparity highlights how the capacity to restructure time

with additional financial support is mediated by intersecting factors of gender, class, and household structure (Crenshaw, 1989). Reflecting on this reality a year after the transfer ended, Sophia noted, “I was able to be part-time because I did have that extra income. In this day and age, you need a household with two incomes in order to survive and balance and manage.” While cash transfers can increase work flexibility, they do not eliminate the broader economic and structural constraints that shape caregiving choices.

5.3 Financial Investments in Parental Well-being

Many parents made intentional investments in their own well-being. Although rarely emphasized in traditional parenting models, these choices emerged in our data as powerful, indirect investments in children. Some used the transfer to access therapy, address health concerns, or recover from burnout—decisions they viewed as essential to showing up for their children with greater patience, regulation, and consistency. While these investments were not always made with children explicitly in mind, they consistently enhanced parents’ emotional availability. As one mother succinctly put it, therapy helped her “not explode so easily,” allowing her to parent more calmly and effectively.

These patterns challenge dominant parenting frameworks that draw rigid lines between spending on parents versus children, as well as research that centers stress reduction while overlooking active efforts to build parental capacity.

5.3.1 Mental Health Investments

Some parents used the cash transfer to access mental health care, expanding their emotional bandwidth for caregiving. Nikki’s experience illustrates this vividly. Juggling part-time work and caring for her school-age daughter and a younger child with a rare genetic disorder, Nikki was navigating the emotional strain of her child’s uncertain prognosis. Early in the program, she disclosed the toll it was taking: “Seeing all the delays and doing everything we can to help her, not even knowing if [the interventions] will even help ever, it’s more stressful than I realized.”

A year into the transfer, Nikki’s accumulated stress reached a breaking point. “Like all of my mental strength just said, ‘Goodbye. Like I’m done here. Like I cannot hold this together anymore,’” she recalled. At that moment, the transfer provided a form of flexibility her regular income alone did not, enabling her to prioritize her own mental health and recovery.

While her husband’s salary and her part-time income covered basic household expenses, the additional support from the cash transfer allowed Nikki to access intensive individual and group therapy

in her native language. The sessions helped her process years of unresolved grief over her daughter's disability. "I'm on the acceptance stage, at least I think I am... She might not be what other children are and I think I made my peace with it," she reflected.

The cash also supported other investments in herself: it covered long-delayed necessary dental care, which improved her sense of self, and allowed her to purchase crochet supplies, reviving a creative outlet that had been sidelined by caregiving demands. These acts of self-care rippled through her family life:

I know I've gotten a lot better at parenting... I had a tendency of pulling back because I wasn't happy, maybe yelling too much. So the payments made my mental space better—that affected [my older daughter] a lot. Like she tells me that she loves me and I love her back. Like it's a very tender, nurturing relationship... The program didn't just help me—it helped her too, because it made me a better mom.

5.3.2 Safety Investments

For some parents, well-being investments meant exiting relationships that threatened family safety and undermined parenting capacity. Lisa's narrative illustrates an extreme example of this pattern. Her relationship had deteriorated into a pattern of toxicity and control that created chronic stress and fear in her home. When she told her partner she was leaving, "He woke me up and he literally had the gun to my head, and said that he was gonna kill me and my kids if I tried to leave him." The transfer provided the financial means to act—allowing her to secure housing within 24 hours and cover all related deposits and fees. Without it, she said, "I probably would've been still trying to figure out how the heck to get out of that situation, honestly." Once removed from the chronic stress and volatility of the relationship, Lisa found herself newly able to focus more on her children:

This last year with it being just me and my kids again, things have been easier... my attention isn't having to be stretched across so many people... I'm able to give them more, direct, one-on-one attention, and really just connect with them more.

She was explicit about how removing herself from the toxic environment had reshaped her parenting: "I can say that my patience level with them has improved... I feel like I'm able to parent them in a more happier environment."

Maisie's experience represents a more common pattern in our sample: relationships that were not physically abusive but emotionally and financially draining. Balancing school, work, and three children while her partner remained unemployed and financially unreliable, Maisie often felt overwhelmed and struggled with consistent parenting. "It's hard to keep pushing and making them do what I know is right when I'm just tired and I don't feel like it," she admitted. The cash transfer provided both the material cushion and psychological confidence to leave.

It probably would've been harder for me to end my relationship because I felt like I needed his income... I think it just helped me have that confidence that I know this is coming... at least, I know we're not gonna be homeless.

After leaving the relationship, Maisie reported notable improvements in her own well-being and her parenting.

I think that my mental health being better makes everything better. I'm more present with my kids, and have more energy to do all the things that they wanna do and generally in a better mood. And we've been able to like, do a lot of things together that we couldn't before.

She directly connected this transformation to her decision to leave: "Being able to leave that relationship and figure things out on my own, I'm more confident and you know, I think that makes me happier, which makes me a better mother, and it's all tied in."

Both narratives demonstrate how parents' ability to engage in patient and present caregiving is inseparable from their own safety, mental health, and well-being.

5.3.3 Physical Health Investments

Some parents faced physical health barriers that limited their ability to engage in presence-centered parenting. Zelda's experience illustrates how the transfer helped alleviate those constraints. Living with degenerative disc disease and limited mobility, she often struggled to participate in her daughters' preferred activities. Without the means to afford medical treatment, outings felt out of reach: "I couldn't take them to go to places like that because I couldn't really stand or walk for very long."

The cash transfer enabled Zelda to afford co-pays for steroid injections and medication only partially covered by insurance. "It's been amazing because before, I struggled with back issues and so, the things that they wanted to do were really like exercise-involved and stuff like that. And I really couldn't do a whole lot of that," she explained. "But I'm actually able to afford my medication. So, I've been able to do more things with them 'cause I've been able to be more mobile as well." With improved mobility, the summer became filled with previously inaccessible experiences like trips to amusement parks, malls, and arcades. For Zelda, managing her back pain was not just a medical intervention—it restored her capacity to be a physically present and engaged parent.

5.4 Financial Investments in Shared Experiences

In addition to supporting their own safety, health, and mental well-being, the cash transfer enabled parents to invest in shared experiences with their children, dedicating both money and time to create

moments of connection. While often dismissed as “consumption” in economic terms, parents consistently framed activities like modest vacations, family outings, or one-on-one time as deliberate relational investments. These experiences were not viewed as luxuries but as ways to make children feel seen, valued, and loved. Parents spoke of these activities as important to affirming their identity as “good” caregivers, strengthening their relationships with their children, and investing in their children’s long-term development.

5.4.1 Overcoming Financial Barriers and Parental Shame

Grace, a single mother of three teenagers, shared how financial constraints had previously prevented her from taking her children to movies or restaurants—experiences that she saw as basic expressions of maternal care. “Before [the transfer] I wasn’t able to just take them out to like a movie or something or to eat out,” she said. “I feel down about myself... Cause it’s like I’m a mother and I need to be doing these things.”

Grace used the transfer to create individualized time with each child through a monthly rotation of “mother-daughter days.” “I have one-on-one with each of them every month...it makes them feel special, like they matter individually, not just as a group.” She also organized a family road trip to a nearby city: “It wasn’t anything big or expensive, but it was just us spending time together, seeing new things. They really enjoyed it. We laughed a lot. Took pictures. I think they’ll remember that more than anything else.” She saw these activities as opportunities for emotional connection and open communication.

We talk about what they want to do for the future, all that kind of stuff. Make sure they know that they can come to me no matter what...if they’re depressed or heartbroken and stuff...I let them know that they can talk to me.

Sophia echoed how resource constraints could make even modest outings feel out of reach. “Like I said, everything costs. You can’t even go to a park anymore without having to pay for parking to get into the decent parks.” She described how a family trip to their favorite swimming spot required careful financial planning: “It’s \$20 to \$30 depending on the day to just get in, but that’s where all the kids like to go...and they always have fun.” With the transfer, she could more easily afford such moments. “We bought a couple sub sandwiches, go spend the day together.” These expenditures, for Sophia, reflected a deliberate investment strategy: “I try my best to give those opportunities of creating memories and moments over buying things. Because at the end of the day, all of the material things are gonna pass away anyways, you know?”

5.4.2 Strengthening Bonds Through Expanded Opportunities

For several families whose demanding work schedules had previously limited quality time together, the transfer enabled investments in shared experiences that helped reclaim time and deepen parent-child connection. Carmen used the money to take her family on a road trip to a neighboring state, giving her seven-year-old daughter rare quality time with her father. “It was so happy to see...her having fun with her dad...it’s always just me and the kids because my husband’s working. So, it was so nice having her dad there and having her and her dad spend time together.” The trip had added meaning because it gave her daughter her first real memory of a family vacation: “It was life-changing. My daughter has never remembered being on vacation because she was so small...She thought we’d never been on vacation. So, that was her first vacation, her first memory of a vacation.”

For other families, the cash transfer allowed for an expansion of existing practices. Kendra, a mother to a two-year-old son and guardian of her teenage brother, had long prioritized quality family time. Before the transfer, “We did like free day trips. I was very masterful at finding free events...we spent a lot of time doing things at the forest preserve and going to the museum on the free days.” The transfer allowed her to maintain the spirit of those shared experiences while increasing their quality and accessibility:

Now they look like road trips, right? Where we go visit a different city, we explore that city and we’re in a hotel room and stuff like that. I can just afford to do kind of the same concept, but I can afford to do it a different way.

One particularly meaningful investment for Kendra was taking her brother and son on their first airplane ride to attend her aunt’s graduation—an experience she hoped would inspire her teenager and strengthen their bond. “Quality time is the most meaningful,” she reflected.

It’s those moments when you truly get a chance to connect with someone, interface, have a dialogue. Those are the things that stick with you. So, I find that I get to understand my boys and learn about what’s going on in their lives...we connect on a much deeper level when we have those moments of exchange or when we’re actually cooking and learning and experiencing together.

5.4.3 Breaking Generational Cycles

For some parents, these shared experiences carried deeper emotional significance by allowing them to offer the kind of presence they had lacked as children. Max, for example, used the transfer to take his son to the trampoline park and other outings. “It gives me time to bond with him, like a father and son bond where I can talk to him, see what’s going on with him. I just like the bond. You know,

cause I never bonded with my dad like that.” For Max and others like him, these experiences were an opportunity to break generational cycles of absence and emotional distance.

Together, these narratives demonstrate how financial investments in shared experiences facilitate presence-centered parenting. Rather than treating outings or activities as passive consumption, parents framed them as opportunities to cultivate emotional presence, deepen relational bonds, and create lasting memories for their children. As Kendra emphasized, this “quality time” fostered understanding and closeness in ways that few other investments could. In this sense, parents redefined shared experiences as a central, legitimate form of caregiving—one that might otherwise have been foreclosed by financial or temporal scarcity.

6 Discussion

6.1 Reframing Parental Investment

This study contributes to a broader rethinking of parental investment by highlighting how time, particularly time that fosters emotional connection, is an often overlooked yet powerful form of caregiving. Dominant frameworks, such as Becker’s Family Investment Theory (1981; 1993) and Lareau’s concept of concerted cultivation (2003), emphasize future-oriented strategies like academic enrichment, extracurricular participation, and institutional engagement aimed at maximizing children’s economic mobility. These models frequently privilege structured activities and measurable outcomes over the everyday relational work of caregiving.

In contrast, our findings reveal a caregiving logic grounded in emotional availability, presence, and shared time. This orientation does not reject economic aspirations but positions emotional connection as foundational to children’s development and future success. Parents described presence not as supplemental, but as central to their caregiving values and practices. Sophia, for example, left full-time employment to remain emotionally attuned to her five children, believing that her consistent presence is critical to helping them navigate adolescence and build confidence. Across interviews, participants emphasized relational care—activities like shared meals, outings, and quiet moments together—as essential for cultivating resilience, trust, and emotional security.

Time, in this context, was not merely a form of capital to be optimized but a resource that carried affective weight. Yet presence-centered parenting does not automatically follow from increased time. What mattered was not just the availability of time, but the capacity to use time in emotionally responsive ways. Parents made difficult trade-offs, such as foregoing income or restructuring routines,

to reclaim caregiving time. When time became more flexible and predictable, they could be more emotionally present, responsive, and attuned. Extending the Family Stress Model (Conger et al., 1994; Masarik and Conger, 2017), our findings show how the cash transfer reduced financial strain and cognitive overload, creating space for this form of care. Nikki, for instance, credited therapy funded by the transfer for helping her become less reactive: “I’m a better mom now.” She observed that her daughter, in turn, became more affectionate and secure.

As Reay (2004) argues, emotional capital can be cultivated and transmitted across generations. Parents in our study deliberately used reclaimed time to invest in this form of care, often with hopes that its benefits would outlast the transfer itself. Grace, for example, scheduled one-on-one outings with each of her children to strengthen their sense of being known and prioritized. For many, emotional presence was not a fallback but a strategic investment: a way to disrupt intergenerational cycles of absence and build resilience, security, and connection.

6.2 Presence as Strategy and Constraint

Our findings complicate the binary between concerted cultivation and natural growth (Lareau, 2003). While low-income parents did not always replicate structured enrichment strategies associated with middle-class parenting, neither did they adopt a passive or disengaged approach. Instead, they engaged in what we term presence-centered parenting: a caregiving logic grounded in relational time, emotional attunement, and shared meaning-making. Kendra’s description of free museum days and road trips funded by the transfer exemplifies this logic—not simply “doing activities,” but cultivating dialogue, identity, and connection through experiences.

At the same time, this orientation was shaped by material constraints. Accessing extracurricular or enrichment programs was prohibitively expensive or logistically challenging for many. As a result, presence-centered parenting often reflected both a deliberate choice and a practical adaptation to structural constraint. Some parents, such as Nadia and Haley, did invest in structured enrichment, hiring tutors or enrolling children in activities like gymnastics and karate. Grace supported her daughters’ cheerleading and dual enrollment; Maisie and Nathan enrolled their children in team sports. Yet even when these investments occurred, parents described the barriers—costs, transportation, scheduling difficulties—that made ongoing participation tenuous. In contexts of economic precarity, presence-centered parenting offers a more viable and sustainable strategy for fostering growth and resilience.

Moreover, presence-centered parenting signaled the incorporation of, rather than a rejection of, developmental goals. Many parents explicitly linked relational investments to future success; activities

like cooking, traveling, or simply spending time together were seen as cognitively and emotionally enriching. However, these forms of investment may be valued differently by institutions such as schools or college admissions offices, where formal extracurriculars often carry more evaluative weight (Ginsburg, 2007; Lam et al., 2012). Our findings challenge these hierarchies by illuminating the developmental significance of everyday relational practices.

Presence-centered parenting, then, should not be seen as a deviation from dominant investment models but as a parallel logic—one that prioritizes emotional connection as a pathway to growth, learning, and resilience. Too often, caregiving rooted in emotional availability is seen as less legitimate than academic or institutional forms of investment, particularly when practiced by low-income families. Our findings suggest that this distinction is both inaccurate and inequitable.

6.3 The Fragility of Relational Time

While presence-centered parenting emerged as a valued and strategic caregiving approach, our findings also reveal its fragility. Emotional availability was shaped not only by parents' intentions but by ongoing material conditions. Even as many parents described meaningful shifts in how they engaged with their children, not all families experienced this change equally or were able to sustain it over time.

Echoing Lareau's insights, we found that families who used the transfer primarily to meet basic needs often faced greater obstacles to emotional presence. Their caregiving more closely resembled the "natural growth" model—not out of disinterest, but because of constraints such as unstable housing, inflexible work schedules, and chronic stress. Presence-centered parenting must therefore be understood not as a fixed identity but as a practice shaped by both intention and circumstance.

For some parents, the transfer provided a temporary reprieve from these constraints, allowing them to reorganize routines, reduce work hours, and become more emotionally attuned. Without sustained support, however, the conditions that enabled emotional availability quickly unraveled under renewed economic pressure (Craig and Brown, 2017; Rodgers, 2023). Maisie described how supporting her son's autism therapy became harder without the time buffer the transfer had provided: "It's just more stressful... I have a lot less time to work on educational stuff with my youngest... It takes a little longer for him to pick up on things... going over it more at home I thought helped." Still, the transfer catalyzed lasting change for some. Parents described shifting their priorities, reorganizing their lives, or making financial sacrifices to preserve the relational gains they had made, though many were unable to sustain this presence once the transfer ended. Presence, once reclaimed, became something many sought—but could not always afford—to protect.

Understanding the fragility of relational time requires an intersectional lens. Parents navigating single parenthood, disability caregiving, health challenges, or housing instability encountered especially steep barriers to emotionally responsive caregiving. Their experiences underscore how class, race, gender, and ability intersect to shape both the availability of time and the social value assigned to how that time is used.

Taken together, our findings point to a prevailing pattern: the cash transfer supported many parents in becoming more emotionally present, but it also revealed the limits of what temporary financial support can accomplish. Without robust and ongoing support, the conditions for presence-centered parenting remain precarious—even when parents deeply value and prioritize this form of care.

7 Conclusion and Policy Implications

These findings call for a broader societal recognition of present-centered parenting and for policies that expand parents' capacity to be emotionally and relationally available to their children. Unconditional cash transfers may do more than alleviate material hardship—they can help create the conditions for deeper parental presence, enabling low-income parents to nurture, guide, and emotionally invest in their children in ways that are often undervalued or overlooked.

Policy frameworks should therefore support not only material relief, but also the time, stability, and flexibility that make presence-centered caregiving possible. Workplace reforms could include predictable scheduling, family-responsive hours, and paid leave. Childcare systems could offer flexible, low-barrier options—such as drop-in care and parent-child programming—that align with the unpredictable demands of low-wage work.

Beyond immediate policy design, these findings contribute to theoretical conversations in family sociology and the sociology of labor by showing how low-income families engage in intentional, relational investments. While dominant economic models often equate parental investment with market-oriented productivity, the families in this study demonstrate that emotional labor, caregiving, and relational continuity are equally essential to child development and intergenerational well-being. Activities often dismissed as leisure, such as unstructured time with children, shared recreational activities, or family outings, are redefined by parents as intentional forms of caregiving and future-building. By centering presence as a strategic asset and form of care work, low-income parents challenge narrow definitions of productivity and offer a more expansive, humanizing vision of what it means to invest in children.

Future research should continue to theorize presence-centered parenting as a vital relational prac-

tice and develop new frameworks and metrics that reflect its significance. Although this study offers important insights into how an unconditional cash transfer shaped parents' capacity for presence-centered parenting, it does not fully examine the intersectional dynamics—particularly those related to race, gender, and household configuration—that affect families' capacity for emotional presence across diverse contexts. These intersectional dynamics remain an important area for continued investigation.

Ultimately, recognizing presence as a legitimate and essential form of parental investment demands a shift in both policy and research toward honoring the everyday relational labor through which families care, adapt, and sustain life under constraint.

Table 1: Baseline Characteristics of Qualitative Participants with Child in Household

Parental Demographics	Mean
Age	31.400
Household Size	3.906
Number of Other Adults in the Household	0.710
Gender	
Male	0.162
Female	0.838
Non-binary/other	0.000
Race/Ethnicity	
Non-Hispanic Black	0.368
Non-Hispanic Asian	0.026
Non-Hispanic White	0.453
Non-Hispanic Native American	0.009
Hispanic	0.179
Relationships	
Is in a Romantic Relationship	0.735
Lives with a Romantic Partner	0.444
Married	0.299
Divorced	0.095
Single Parent	0.496
Income	
Personal Income (\$1000s)	17.350
Household Income (\$1000s)	25.420
Under FPL	0.462
Employed	0.462
<i>N</i>	117

Table 2: Qualitative Study Timeline

Interview Wave	Baseline	Round Two	Round Three	Round Four	Round Five	Round Six*
Field Period	July 2020– December 2020	May 2021– July 2021	November 2021– February 2022	September 2022– February 2023	September 2023– February 2024	August 2024– ongoing
Response Rate (%)	98.1%	96.1%	97.4%	85.5%	89.5%	71.7%
<i>N</i> participants [†]	156	154	154	152	152	152
Total Interviews Completed	156	148	150	130	136	109
Treatment Completed	131	123	125	124	118	95
Control Completed	25	23	23	22	18	14

*Data collection for round 6 is ongoing, response rates are as of May 2025
Several participants in the sample passed away*

		Income	
		<100% FPL	100% - 175% FPL
Opportunity	COI level low or very low	Strata 1 28 treatment 6 control	Strata 3 26 treatment 3 control
	COI level high or very high	Strata 2 26 treatment 4 control	Strata 4 24 treatment 3 control

Figure 1: Qualitative sample stratified by income level and neighborhood opportunity score

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