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Living Apart for the Paycheck

By JENNIFER CONLIN

IT'S a typical weekday in the Ghosh household. Two-year-old Emilio, strapped in a highchair, is dallying over breakfast while his father pleads with him to finish.

"Try some blueberries," Gautam Ghosh suggests, then slips his hand into a Baby Einstein puppet and begins his daily ritual of entertaining Emilio while his wife gets ready for work.

Such scenes are hardly unusual for two-career couples with children, but this one is remarkable for the fact that Dr. Ghosh, an assistant professor at the [University of Pennsylvania](#), is nearly 9,000 miles away and a daunting 16 hours behind his family's time zone. When his wife, Cecilia, and Emilio begin their day in New Zealand, it is the previous afternoon in Dr. Ghosh's Philadelphia office, where he conducts his morning video chats with Emilio via Skype — software that enables users to transmit their voices and images through the Internet.

"We talk in the morning and around dinner, when my wife needs my help the most," said Mr. Ghosh, whose wife recently accepted a post as an assistant professor at the University of Otago in New Zealand.

"This was a career decision we simply had to make for financial stability," he said.

The Ghoshes are hardly alone in choosing to live in different places because of work. In 2006, the [Census Bureau](#) reported that 3.6 million married Americans (not including separated couples) were living apart from their spouses. In March, Worldwide ERC, the association for work-force mobility, released a report revealing that three-fourths of the 174 relocation agents surveyed had dealt with at least one commuter marriage in 2007, a 53 percent increase since 2003.

"Families today are undergoing all sorts of strains that didn't exist before and are simply having to adjust to make things work," said David Popenoe, co-director of the National Marriage Project at [Rutgers University](#), who says the challenging economy may force more couples into commuter marriages for the sake of a paycheck.

Reginald C. Richardson, a vice president of the Family Institute at [Northwestern University](#) and a lecturer in psychology, agrees. "I think we are going to see more and more commuter marriages in the future, given the global economy and the fact that our technology now makes this more doable," Dr. Richardson said.

Emma Child, a partner in the investment banking group of Rose Partnership in London, a financial services and corporate search firm, said that in recent months she had noted a marked increase in the willingness of couples to live in different locations.

“Eighteen months ago anyone searching for a new job would ask to be placed in their current location,” Ms. Child said. “Now they come in and say ‘I am prepared to move,’ even, if necessary, without the family.”

She added: “We send a lot of people to emerging markets right now. But honestly, who wants to move the family to Lagos? And if the spouse is working, who wants to give up the second income?”

Until last year, the author and teacher Miles Harvey and his wife, Rengin Altay, were getting by in Chicago on two freelance incomes. But when his wife, an actress, lost her [Screen Actors Guild](#) insurance because her voice-over work had all but dried up, they began worrying about their financial future, particularly with two young children to support.

“I wonder if we would be doing this if the economy was better,” said Mr. Harvey, who accepted an assistant professorship at the University of New Orleans last spring and who now commutes weekly to Chicago. Though the plan is for the family to move to Louisiana, he says, “It is not a great time to buy a house in New Orleans, nor is it a good time to sell one in Chicago.”

Lori Janoff, who lives in the family home in Larchmont, N.Y., with her two youngest children, ages 17 and 15, while her husband, Peter, is in Brazil working as an asset manager for a property management company, said, “Without a financial incentive I don’t know why anyone would do this.”

Ms. Janoff, who sees her husband once every six weeks, when he flies home, added, “It was the perfect timing professionally for him, and the worst timing personally for our family.” She said it would be disruptive to move her daughter, who is in her last year of high school, noting that moving to Brazil would also be tough on her and her youngest son.

“We don’t speak Portuguese, and we would both have to make all new friends,” Ms. Janoff said. Of course, raising children as a single parent has its share of challenges, some of which are similar to divorced parents.

“I have all the responsibility now for the children and have had to become the serious disciplinarian,” Ms. Janoff said. When her husband comes home he gets to be “Mr. Fun,” she said.

Ms. Altay of Chicago said, “I know I holler more,” adding that she retained her role as chief authoritarian when her husband visited because “it helps to have one boss laying down the rules.”

Conversely, the out-of-town spouses lament that they feel like outsiders in their own homes — an issue Amos Guiora, a law professor at the [University of Utah](#), said he got over quickly when he moved in 2004 to the United States from Israel for work.

“I realized quickly my status had changed,” Mr. Guiora said. “You have to pick up the rhythm of the family, they shouldn’t have to pick up yours.”

Sarah Larson, whose husband commutes to Detroit from Chicago three days a week to manage a real estate development project, said she treated their two children, ages 11 and 13, differently while he was away. “I don’t worry about what is for dinner when my husband is not home,” Ms. Larson said. “I am sure the kids’ manners are deteriorating and they are not getting as nutritious a meal, but that part is definitely a lot easier.”

The at-home spouse may find that there are actually a few small advantages to having their partner away.

While loneliness is often a big factor for both spouses, it can also add romance to the relationship.

“The physical distance has been exhilarating for our relationship,” said Audrey O’Connell, a department head at a London museum, who has been married 42 years to her husband, John. They are on their third year of a long-distance marriage (he moved back to their home in Montana to work for an educational institution) and have a rule that they must meet at least once every five weeks for a minimum of five days.

And while technology like Skype can help, it is not always the answer.

“I hate e-mail,” said Mr. Guiora’s wife, Hagit. Her husband calls her twice a day and sleeps with his cellphone next to his ear so their three children can reach him any time of day.

Still, technology has made it much easier for couples to commute.

“A couple of hundred years ago a sailor went to sea and you didn’t know if he were dead or alive for a few years,” says Tina B. Tessina, whose latest book, “The Commuter Marriage: Keep Your Relationship Close While You’re Far Apart,” gives couples tips on how to stay connected, which include making use of the latest technology.

One unexpected reaction commuting couples encounter is the assumption that there is some underlying problem in the marriage.

“We looked at the situation as an experiment, but even our children worried we might be on the road to divorce,” said Ms. O’Connell, whose grown children have families of their own.

However, as Brenda Fender, a relocation expert and director at Worldwide ERC, points out, the stress involved in maintaining a long-distance marriage can emphasize underlying problems. “These types of work assignments have a profound effect on the family,” Ms. Fender said. “If there is any trouble in the relationship, this can be the tipping point.”

While most commuting couples interviewed for this article view the situation as a temporary necessity and feel optimistic about their futures, at least one person’s marriage did not withstand the stress.

“My short-term project in Europe gave me a new perspective on our 22-year marriage,” said one woman, who asked that her name not be used. “It basically opened a whole new vista on my life and convinced me it was time for a divorce.”

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