

BostonWorks

VIEW FROM THE CUBE

Familiar company takes grind out of daily commute

By David Whitemyer

There's a breakdown on Route 16." "The Expressway is tied up from Columbia to South Station."

"Heading into the city, the Pike is jammed with the tolls."

Sound familiar? It's the morning commute for the 1.2 million people who drive into Boston to work each day. Now, add to the pot one squirming baby, a chatty 3 year old, and $\frac{3}{4}$ cup spilled Cheerios. Slowly mix in a smelly diaper and 12 rounds of "The Wheels on the Bus." Sound pretty miserable? Tortuous even? Actually, it's not as bad as you might think.

After a few years of hemming and hawing about giving up numerous conveniences, my wife and I recently decided to pick up the kids and move to the suburbs. We left a popular, vibrant city neighborhood for a little white farmhouse and a patch of grass that we could call our very own. And our biggest concern: How are we going to get to work and school? Solution: Slog through traffic.

In the city, my wife and I have jobs we enjoy. It's also where our children go to day care and preschool. This means that every weekday we get up early, pile into the station wagon, and spend 45 minutes on the road. And at the end of the day, we do it all in reverse. The plus side of this is that we get to spend an hour and a half of each day together, with no interruptions — no television, no phones, no computer. It's a kind of forced intimacy. It's concentrated family time, when no one is multitasking.

As far as I know, there's not yet any evidence showing that too much time spent in a car is bad for children. There is, however, quite a bit of research concluding that kids who spend a lot of time with their parents are healthier mentally. Granted, the family car isn't the ideal setting for interaction and bonding, but

we're determined to make the most of our situation.

Before settling on our current automobile route to town, we experimented with a number of commuting options. We tried the train. And as long as we have kids, we'll probably never try it again. I had unrealistic fantasies of sitting quietly on the commuter rail, reading Dr. Seuss books to my oldest boy while our other son slept peacefully in his mother's arms. It didn't take long for that bubble to burst. For me, the stress of finding a parking spot at the station was worse than bumper-to-bumper traffic. For our 3 year old, the train was too quiet for him to feel comfortable singing the ABCs in his silly alien voice. And for the other passengers, well, I don't think they appreciated our toy-filled bags banging into their heads.

Back in the car, we spent a few weeks testing every imaginable route to the city. We used back roads, side roads, and secondary roads, attempting to shave valuable minutes off the drive. But as veteran

commuters already know, those secret shortcuts aren't really that secret. We ended up selecting the straight shot, exit to exit on the Expressway.

Being family commuters means performing a balancing act of pros and cons, or at the very least, attempting to turn some cons into pros. The negative aspects of spending 90 minutes in the car together are slim, but obvious. Simply stated, it's a drag to be in the car for that long. "I'd rather be fishing," says the bumper sticker. Who wouldn't?

Another bumper is that we are at the mercy of one another's schedule. We've found ways to make this work well. If my wife has to work late some evening, which is rare, it means we all have to stay late. But it also means I have an opportunity to take my boys out to eat. If one of my sons gets ill and has to leave school, then we all have to go home. Because of this uncertainty, and because we can't stay late or just drop into the office for a few minutes here and there, we're more efficient and

productive at work. We fulfill our employment responsibilities during typical working hours.

Accepting our situation, we've made it so the positives far outweigh the negatives. At the top of the pro list is the simple fact that we like our house. Despite the lengthy drive, it's nice to come home to every night. It's quiet and pleasant. We enjoy the sound of crickets in our backyard — something difficult to obtain in our old city neighborhood where the sounds included mostly car alarms and late-night partygoers.

Our oldest child is learning to read. We take advantage of our freeway confinement to further his learning. Using billboards and license plates, we play letter games. He's the only kid in his class who can spell *detour*. We count numbers together. We do rhymes. And we tell jokes.

Like most preschool-aged boys he's into trucks, so we spend a lot of time spotting and identifying construction vehicles. Do you know the difference between



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a front shovel and a front-end loader? He does. How many preschoolers do you know who can keep up with the Big Dig's changing location of the Exit 20 off-ramp? Mine can. He's the world's youngest civil engineer. "Look, mommy! An excavator is carrying re-bar to that truss!"

When we're not performing automobile edu-tainment, it's down time for our sons, both high-energy, constantly moving children. My wife and I have pleasant conversation while our big boy sits quietly listening to the audio tape from "Toy Story 2" (178 times since Christmas, I've calculated). For our 10 month old, these 45-minute drives have become convenient times for a healthy nap. They're part of his daily schedule, making bedtime easier. I'd also like to think that his pretoddler brain is absorbing something from our spelling games.

In our culture of hectic schedules and rushing around, in which family members hardly see one another, the opposite is true in our family. The biggest bonus for us is that after our evening commute, we all have dinner together. We come home, make a meal, and sit in the dining room. Every single night. In this day and age, that's something to brag about.

Driving into the city each day with the whole family hasn't been all that bad. We've been lucky so far. It has been a mild winter, with no major blizzards causing 10-hour delays (ask me again in a year if I'm still feeling this optimistic). And we've turned the daily grind into a fun experience, creating my new motto: A family that drives together, thrives together.

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