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## Do Parents Spend Enough Time With Their Children?

by D'Vera Cohn

(January 2007) Recently published research concludes that today's U.S. mothers and fathers spend at least as many hours caring for their children each week as parents did four decades ago during an era that in the popular imagination was a golden age of family togetherness.

It may seem contradictory, then, that many parents complain of feeling rushed and of not having enough time with their sons and daughters. One reason for this, authors Suzanne Bianchi, John Robinson and Melissa Milkie suggest in their book, *Changing Rhythms of American Family Life*, is that there is a gap between parents' self-evaluations and the currently high cultural expectations for "intensive parenting."

Parents today correctly believe they are busier than mothers and fathers of past decades, according to the authors, who are sociologists at the University of Maryland. Total workloads—the combined hours people spend in paid jobs and unpaid family or household care—"have risen and remain high" for married parents, especially dual-earner couples, and for single mothers. Mothers and fathers have equal total workloads, the authors report, but the mix continues to reflect traditional gender roles. Although fathers have picked up some domestic work, mothers still do more around the house and spend fewer hours in the workplace than fathers do.

The authors made extensive use of time diaries kept by parents as part of large research studies, in which a standard series of questions walk respondents through a complete day. The first national-level study was conducted in 1965, and it was replicated in 1975, 1985, and 1995. They drew on other time-diary studies from the late 1990s and early this decade, and made use of the Current Population Survey data on work hours, the 2000 General Social Survey, and other material.

Time diaries indicate that married fathers spent an average 6.5 hours a week caring for their children in 2000, a 153 percent increase since 1965. Married mothers spent 12.9 hours, a 21 percent increase. Single mothers spent 11.8 hours, a 57 percent increase.

These increases are powerful because the figures are for "primary care" where the child is the main focus of attention, not for time spent with the child while doing other things. Time-diary numbers, however, do not say whether mothers are as accessible to their children at home during as many hours as they were in the past.

### Child-Care Time Rose Since 1985

The rise in child-care time documented in parents' diaries began after 1985. Mothers' child-care hours fell from 1965 to 1985, consistent with an era in which the average number of children per family declined, women's employment rose sharply, and single parenting increased. Since then, though, mothers with paid jobs and mothers without them have increased their time with their children. Married fathers' child-care hours changed little until 1985, and rose substantially after that.

The U.S. trend parallels findings of national-level time-diary studies in Canada, the United Kingdom, France, and the Netherlands, as well as limited data from Australia. Both mothers and fathers in those countries have increased their hours with their children, fathers most dramatically.

U.S. mothers and fathers have increased the hours they devote to enriching activities such as reading and playtime, as well as to basic child care such as feeding and dressing. This finding, the authors said, refutes "any notion that quality activities have been sacrificed as time constraints on employed parents and single mothers have increased."

But in the face of competing demands, child-care time does not just happen: Parents have had to employ a variety of strategies to maintain the hours they spend with their sons and daughters.

To make time, mothers have reduced their housework hours over the years by an amount the authors said matches their increase in paid work hours. They have cut their free time, including hours spent on civic activities, according to time diaries cited by the authors. Employed mothers spend less time with their husbands, and have given up time with friends and relatives. Fathers have reduced the hours they spend on personal care.

Another way parents try to make more time for their children is to do two things at once. Time diary comparisons show that parents spent twice as many hours multitasking in 2000 as they did in 1975. During waking hours, "about half of today's parents' time is spent doing two or more activities simultaneously," the authors write.

"They're doing a good job of fitting it in," said Milkie, an associate professor of sociology. "They may feel the guilt, and that's what's bringing them to take their kid to the grocery store when they don't have to."

### **Mothers More Likely to Feel Rushed**

Although time diaries show that mothers and fathers spend about the same amount of time doing two things at once, survey data show that mothers are more likely to report multitasking all the time as well as feeling rushed. Employed mothers feel the time crunch more than those without paid jobs, and single mothers feel the most time-pressed of all. Perhaps, the authors suggest, that is because the complex nature of running a household today means that there never is a moment when something does not need to be done.

Parents, especially mothers, may be responding to heightened expectations, the authors said. "If our interpretation is correct, the requirements for effective and good mothering have ratcheted upward at the very time when there are expanded opportunities for women to do other things with their time, such as devoting themselves to fulfilling jobs," they write.

Especially among middle-class parents, children increasingly are expected to be the center of family life. Today's parents are expected to monitor their children carefully because fears of abuse and of crime have risen. They are expected to guide and nurture their children through every aspect of growing up, and to be involved in all of their activities. Because the average family now has fewer children than in the 1960s, the investment in each child is greater.

No wonder, then, that 40 percent to 60 percent of parents feel they spend too little time with their children, the authors note. They live in a society, said Milkie, where "you can't spend enough time with your kids . . . cultural ideals are really feeding into this."

The authors acknowledge that some of their conclusions go against the grain of popular belief. Although they raise concerns about the strains on parents, especially single mothers, they conclude that some aspects of childrearing have not suffered in the transition to a world where most mothers have joined the labor force.

"Somehow, then, despite concerns of policymakers and others that children are not receiving sufficient parental time," they write, "parents seem to have compensated for family and work arrangements that at first glance should have taken away from childrearing."

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### **Reference**

Suzanne M. Bianchi, John P. Robinson, and Melissa A. Milkie, *Changing Rhythms of American Family Life* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006).

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