

## **A brief report on Mothers' time & child & adolescent development: Evidence from time diaries.**

Even as mothers' time with children has increased from the 1970s, concerns about time seem to have strengthened since mothers of young children marched into the labor force in increasing numbers from the 1960s through the 1990s (Bianchi 2000; Bianchi, Robinson and Milkie 2006). Some refer to the current era as a time of "intensive mothering" (Hays 1996) in which mothers are expected to individually devote enormous amounts of time and energy to ensure children 'turn out' to be happy and successful. What outcomes for children are we interested in? Studies based on children's time diaries from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) examine time and certain aspects of child development. The studies use somewhat different samples, age groupings, aggregates of maternal time, and waves of data and typically examine very specific outcomes: verbal skills; math skills, internalizing problems (i.e., depression) and externalizing (i.e., behavior) problems.

**Mothers' "quality" time & children's well-being.** Time diaries clearly show how children's time with mothers in "quality" activities links to positive outcomes. More time in educational activities like reading and teaching, clearly links to outcomes such as enhanced verbal skills (Hsin and Felfe 2014). And structured time -- in lessons, sports, camps, and other outings with mothers -- is also linked to positive outcomes for children (Hsin and Felfe 2014). Children of highly-educated mothers spent more time with mothers in these "quality" activities (Hsin and Felfe 2014).

**What about the amount or quantity of time?** Often, the focus of concern about the quantity of mothers' time is about younger children—how often are mothers doing things with children (engaged with them), and are moms "there"--in other words, are they accessible to children? Diary studies indicate that the positive effects of mothers' "quantity time" are evident in [adolescents](#) and school-aged children, though effects are small and dependent on the measures, and the subgroup examined.

With a focus on mothers' time *unique from fathers'*, Milkie et al. (2015) used a cross-section of two age groups (3-11) and (12-18) and examined mothers' engaged and accessible time. To attempt to assess the uniqueness of mothers' time, this study focused mainly on mothers' time when fathers were *not* present in two categories: engaged in activities and accessible to children. Although more exclusive maternal time engaged or accessible was unrelated to children's outcomes, more engaged time with mothers was associated with fewer behavioral problems for adolescents, and more "parent time" with adolescents (mothers' time with youth that also included fathers) was associated with positive outcomes across several domains. When combining mothers' engaged plus accessible time to equal total contact time, and considering all mothers' time, regardless of who else is present, Fomby and Musick (2018) showed that higher quantities of time influenced children's and adolescents' reading scores; though the effects were small. With a focus on mothers' employment in married-parent families only, Hsin and Felfe (2014) used fixed effect models to show that the total quantity of mothers' time (time engaged plus accessible, regardless of fathers' presence) was linked with outcomes differently at younger (0-6) versus older ages (6-18). For the younger group (0-6), more total time with mothers was linked to *worse* outcomes on cognitive skills and behavior. For older children and adolescents (6-18), more time was positive for behavior.

**Continued questions:** An important question is about the "counterfactual"—what activities would children be doing and with whom would they do them, when not with mothers (Waldfogel 2016)? Time with fathers, grandparents and others in the same high-quality activities like reading, teaching, lessons, sports and so on---should be equally beneficial for children. Moreover, another alternative to mothers' time -- time with [high-quality formal child caregivers](#) -- has long-term academic and social benefits for

children from disadvantaged families, and allows mothers to be employed more easily. Mothers' employment after children's first year provides some [benefits](#) to children.

Another question is about structured activities like lessons and sports -- in diaries these are sometimes counted as time with mothers if mothers are nearby waiting or watching. Presumably much of the benefit of these activities comes through expert adults like coaches and piano teachers involved in teaching or leading the activities; -- or perhaps the rules and peer relationships within structured time --- more so than through the waiting or watching mother. Structured activities also matter for well-being when children are not with mothers. Thus, mothers' versus others' roles, and the value of the activity, partialled out from whomever it is done with, are continuing questions of interest. Indeed, mothers' less visible work of managing the family's schedule, and getting children to be able to participate (assuming resources are available to do so) is potentially the most key aspect of her role in this regard, as opposed to time spent nearby when the lessons or structured activities happen. It may be useful to conceptualize and assess time "with" children versus time spent securing services, resources and advantages "for" children.

Another question is about the many activities that are contained within "quantity" time (Kalil and Mayer 2016). Hsin and Felfe (2014) show it may be useful to de-compose the total time with mothers into "quality" activities (educational and structured) that are positive for children and other non-quality forms ("unstructured" such as media time) that, at early ages, are negatively associated with behavior. Time spent with media, which is sizeable and has grown since these data were collected in the late 1990s and early 2000s, is presumably not good at young ages regardless of whether mothers are around or another adult is around. Future studies should examine activities with electronic devices -- how they may take away from other activities or people but may also "connect" parents to (especially) adolescents in new ways (Nelson 2010).

There is some discussion that "over" involvement or "helicoptering" may not be useful (e.g., Robinson and Harris 2014) or may make children less resilient, or more anxious or dependent than the "free range" children of an earlier era.

Finally, many things besides "quality" or the total quantity of activities with mothers are important to consider for children's academic and social well-being. Demographic factors like mothers' education level, which is strongly linked to children's outcomes, as well as family meals, emotional support, mothers' own mental health, and children's own educational and structured activities independent of mothers, for example.

**The big picture—Mothers need support: Rearing children in the U.S. and other cultures.** In addition to child well-being, we should consider mother and family well-being – we do not ask enough questions about mothers themselves. Employed mothers often *feel* time deficits with children and these emotions are linked to their sense of work-family balance and mental health (Milkie et al. 2010; Nomaguchi, Milkie and Bianchi 2005). Mothers, especially employed mothers, sacrifice leisure, sleep, and time with others for child care and feel rushed and as if they need more time for themselves at much higher levels than fathers (Milkie, Raley and Bianchi 2009). Mothers need the care work of fathers, other adults, and communities, and they need workplace flexibility and autonomy to maintain their *own* well-being and care for their families. Moreover, U.S. mothers and children live in a highly unequal society, wherein many children and their families suffer from few resources and need greater supports.

National policies: Notably, the U.S. scores low on many measures of child and youth academic and social well-being compared to other nations (see the [UNICEF comparative overview](#) of child well-being in rich countries) even though U.S. parents' time in child care is relatively high (Bianchi et. al 2006). The U.S. is also notably deficient in parental well-being. Of 22 countries, U.S. parents are the least happy relative to

nonparents due to the lack of policies such as paid leave, and especially paid sick and vacation time (see the [CCF Brief](#) by Jennifer Glass). Implementing these family-time friendly policies would allow the kind of flexibility not only for parents of very young children, but of older children and adolescents whose parents want and need to be able to take unscheduled time for and with children.

#### **NOTES:**

##### **Some Quantity Time Definitions & information about Time Diary studies:**

\*Total “engaged” time: includes all time when a child is doing any activity with mothers (not just “quality” activities). Can be assessed with others present or not.

\*Total “accessible” time: includes all time a child is doing activities alone or with others, when mothers are “there” in the vicinity but not actively engaged with the child. Can be assessed with others present or not.

\*Total time with children (engaged + accessible time). This is sometimes divided into subcategories: based on “quality”-- educational; structured versus “unstructured.”

\*\*For children’s diary studies, 1 weekday & 1 weekend day of a child’s week are used to create “weekly hours” in activities. Activity codes include who the child/adolescent was engaged with (if anyone) and who else was “there” (accessible). The PSID diary data were *not* collected during the two summer months of July & August. Diary studies normally control for how “typical” diary days were.

\*\*Total time mothers spend in childcare: This is measured from adult-centric diaries, such as those in the American Time Use Study (ATUS), and typically do not have child well-being measures.

Total time in childcare includes mothers’ time in: routine care (basic child care, medical care, time in managing children’s schedules/attending their events] and interactive care (educational activities and play). Total time mothers spend in childcare is often erroneously referred to as “total time with children,” but these tabulations exclude most time when mothers have children around while they are doing other activities.

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