

Married and Single Parents Spending More Time With Children, Study Finds

By Robert Pear

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 16 — Despite the surge of women into the work force, mothers are spending at least as much time with their children today as they did 40 years ago, and the amount of child care and housework performed by fathers has sharply increased, researchers say in a new study, based on analysis of thousands of personal diaries.

“We might have expected mothers to curtail the time spent caring for their children, but they do not seem to have done so,” said one of the researchers, Suzanne M. Bianchi, chairwoman of the department of sociology at the University of Maryland. “They certainly did curtail the time they spent on housework.”

The researchers found that “women still do twice as much housework and child care as men” in two-parent families. But they said that total hours of work by mothers and fathers were roughly equal, when they counted paid and unpaid work.

Using this measure, the researchers found “remarkable gender equality in total workloads,” averaging nearly 65 hours a week.

The findings are set forth in a new book, “Changing Rhythms of American Family Life,” published by the Russell Sage Foundation and the American Sociological Association. The research builds on work that Ms. Bianchi did in 16 years as a demographer at the Census Bureau.

At first, the authors say, “it seems reasonable to expect that parental investment in child-rearing would have declined” since 1965, when 60 percent of all children lived in families with a breadwinner father and a stay-at-home mother. Only about 30 percent of children now live in such families. With more mothers in paid jobs, many policy makers have assumed that parents must have less time to interact with their children.

But, the researchers say, the conventional wisdom is not borne out by the data they collected from families asked to account for their time. The researchers found, to their surprise, that married and single parents spent more time teaching, playing with and caring for their children than parents did 40 years ago.

For married mothers, the time spent on child care activities increased to an average of 12.9 hours a week in 2000, from 10.6 hours in 1965. For married fathers, the time spent on child care more than doubled, to 6.5 hours a week, from 2.6 hours. Single mothers reported spending 11.8 hours a week on child care, up from 7.5 hours in 1965.

“As the hours of paid work went up for mothers, their hours of housework declined,” said Ms. Bianchi, a former president of the Population Association of America. “It was almost a one-for-one trade.”

Meaghan O. Perlowski, a 32-year-old mother of three in Des Moines, said in an interview, "Spending time with my kids is my highest priority, but it's a juggling act."

Ms. Perlowski, who is a full-time pharmaceutical sales representative, said she did grocery shopping and errands on her lunch hour and cut back on housework so she would have more time with her children.

"We don't worry much about keeping the house spotless," she said. "It's sometimes a mess, cluttered with school papers, backpacks and toys, but that's O.K."

Fathers have picked up some of the slack. Married fathers are spending more time on housework: an average of 9.7 hours a week in 2000, up from 4.4 hours in 1965. That increase was more than offset by the decline in time devoted to housework by married mothers: 19.4 hours a week in 2000, down from 34.5 hours in 1965.

When Ms. Perlowski took a business trip on Thursday, her husband, Jim, took time from work to be home with their children, ages 1, 4 and 7.

In Miami, Ian D. Abrams, a 33-year-old marketing executive, said that since his daughter was born two years ago, he had done "a substantial amount of cooking and cleaning, to take that burden off my wife," but he admitted that home repairs were often delayed. His wife, Yolanda, took a full-time job as a state court employee when their daughter, Marley, was 14 months old.

The researchers found that many parents juggled their work and family duties by including children in their own leisure and free-time activities. Married mothers, in particular, often combine child care with other activities.

Tammy L. Curtis, 34, a schoolteacher in Glendale, Ariz., outside Phoenix, said she typically worked from 7 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., but always made time for her 5-year-old son and 9-year-old daughter.

"I cook less," Ms. Curtis said. "I exercise less. And I do a lot of multitasking. When my son is at soccer practice, I sit on the sidelines grading papers. I have no time for personal relaxation."

The book's two other co-authors, Prof. John P. Robinson and Melissa A. Milkie, are also sociologists at the University of Maryland. Rather than relying on anecdotes and images in the mass media, the researchers used "time diaries" to measure how families spent their time. Using a standard set of questions, professional interviewers asked parents to chronicle all their activities on the day before the interview.

Katharine G. Abraham, a former commissioner of labor statistics, said

the new book provided “the definitive word” on how parents allocated time between paid work and family responsibilities. The most recent numbers, for 2000, are remarkably similar to time-use data in a new survey conducted annually since 2003 by the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Census Bureau.

Gary L. Bauer, a Christian conservative who defends traditional marriage as president of the advocacy group American Values, said the research was encouraging in one respect.

“It indicates that parents, especially mothers, instinctively know that the line promoted by social scientists in the 1960’s and 70’s — that professional child care can provide all the things that maternal care can — is not correct,” Mr. Bauer said. “Mothers made adjustments in their own lives to ensure that, even with jobs outside the home, they provide what only mothers can provide.”

The authors cited several factors to help explain how parents managed to spend more time with their children, despite working longer hours:

¶ Many couples delay having children to “a point later in life when they want to spend time with those children.” People who are uninterested in raising children can “opt out of parenting altogether,” by using birth control.

¶ Families are smaller today than in 1965, and parents are more affluent, so they can invest more time and money in each child.

¶ Social norms and expectations have changed, prompting parents to make “greater and greater investments in child-rearing.” As couples have fewer children, they feel “pressure to rear a perfect child.”

¶ Many parents feel they need to keep a closer eye on their children because of concerns about crime, school violence, child abduction and abuse.

While married mothers and married fathers were approaching “gender equality,” measured by total hours of work, the researchers found stark differences among women. These disparities suggest why working mothers often feel hurried and harried.

Over all, the researchers said, employed mothers have less free time and “far greater total workloads than stay-at-home mothers.” The workweek for an employed mother averages 71 hours, almost equally divided between paid and unpaid work, compared with a workweek averaging 52 hours for mothers who are not employed outside the home.

On average, the researchers said, employed mothers get somewhat less sleep and watch less television than mothers who are not employed, and they also spend less time with their husbands.