



Time with children and employed parents' emotional well-being



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ABSTRACT

Using the experience sampling method and survey data from the 500 Family Study this study examined how parents feel when they spend time with their children and whether their emotional experiences differ by type of activity and the parent's gender. I found that mothers spent more time in childcare than fathers but this disparity was primarily due to mothers' more frequent engagement in activities that were not child-centered (i.e., non-focused and passive childcare). Multilevel models further showed that engagement in these activities was related to higher positive affect. Shared meals and leisure activities were particularly beneficial to parents' emotional well-being and the likelihood of engaging in them was not affected by parents' paid work hours. By contrast, routine childcare was associated with increased stress and lower engagement but only among mothers. Mothers were also less likely to provide childcare in conjunction with their spouse. These findings reveal the subtle dimensions of the unequal division of childcare by gender.

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1. Introduction

Scholars and policymakers consider the time that parents and children spend together as an important feature of family life. Most research in this field has focused on the importance of family routines and shared interactive activities for children's development, health, and psychosocial adjustment (e.g., Fiese and Schwartz, 2008; Musick and Meier, 2012; Zick et al., 2001), whereas the issue of how time with children affects parents' well-being has received little empirical attention. This is, however, an important issue because research views childcare time as a key to parents' sense of work–family balance (Milkie et al., 2010).

Using data from the 500 Family Study, a sample of dual-earner middle-class families in the United States, this article contributes to research on time-use among employed families by examining how parents feel when they spend time with their children and whether their emotional experiences differ by type of activity and the parent's gender. The 500 Family Study is particularly well-suited for studying the emotional correlates of childcare time because it collected data using the experience sampling method (ESM), a unique form of time diary that provides in situ information about respondents' activities, companionships, and emotional states throughout the day.

Following previous research, in this study I examine whether the parent provides childcare in conjunction with his or her spouse. One-on-one time with children is qualitatively different from caring in the company of one's spouse. Parents who spend a large share of their childcare time in conjunction with their spouse are less constrained by the presence of children compared to parents who most often provide care to children alone (Craig, 2006; Craig and Mullan, 2011). The study also

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estimates the association between childcare time and parents' emotional well-being as a function of the type of activity parents and children engage in together (e.g. [Craig and Mullan, 2011](#)). Specifically, I distinguish between four distinct child-centered activities, which include routine care time, educational time, mealtime, and leisure time; non-focused childcare time (e.g., doing household chores while talking to the child); and passive childcare time, which refers to moments when the child is present but no direct parent-child interaction takes place. The inclusion of measures that are not child-centered is an advantage of the present study because many analyses exclude this important dimension of childcare, which reflects parents' supervisory and on-call responsibilities (see exceptions in [Budig and Folbre, 2004](#); [Craig and Bittman, 2008](#); [Folbre et al., 2005](#)). Thus, by decomposing childcare time into specific activities that vary by the level of intensity of the parent-child interaction, this study seeks to shed light on the complex meaning of time with children for mothers' and fathers' well-being.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Time with children and parents' well-being

Research considers shared parent-child time as beneficial to family members' well-being because it allows parents and their children to communicate and bond with each other ([Bronfenbrenner, 1979](#)). Conceptualized as "time out of time" ([Gillis, 2003](#)), some scholars view family time as an opportunity for parents to escape the pressures of everyday life and replenish themselves ([Larson and Richards, 1994](#)). Consistent with this view, [Milkie et al. \(2010\)](#) found that parental time with children was associated with lower levels of work-family conflict.

Scholars, social activists, and parents alike have debated the question of when and how these shared moments of respites and enjoyment are best achieved. Some argue that they mainly consist of "blocks" of time that revolve around special family activities and events, such as outdoor activities, birthday parties, and visits to the zoo ([Gillis, 2003](#); [Snyder, 2007](#)). Others focus on everyday routines, such as when parents and children travel to and from school, do chores together, have family meals, or watch TV together ([Fiese and Schwartz, 2008](#); [Tubbs et al., 2005](#)). As [Kremer-Sadlik and Paugh](#) note, joint routine activities allow parents and children to engage in "quality moments of positive interactions marked with affection and love that may aid in maintaining personal and family well-being" (2007, p. 297).

However, time with children can also be frustrating and annoying. Studies show that parents often argue with their children over issues related to housework ([Allison and Schultz, 2004](#); [Larson and Richards, 1994](#)) and homework, which they view as important yet burdensome activities ([Daly, 2001](#); [Garey, 1999](#); [Kralovec and Buell, 2000](#)). Research further suggests that not only routine but also leisure activities can be bothering for parents. For example, [Shaw \(2008\)](#), in her qualitative study of family leisure among Canadian families, describes how children's behavior, including fights with siblings and complaints about feeling bored, tired, or upset, sometimes "ruined" family events and activities.

[Shaw \(2008\)](#) also found that parents often complained about the amount of work involved in planning, organizing, and carrying out family activities (see also [Arendell, 2001](#)). These complaints underscore the negative work-like character of family leisure and resonate with [Hochschild's \(1997\)](#) claim, when referring to family time, that "these brief respites of 'relaxed time' themselves come to look more and more like segments of job time, with parents punching in and out as if on a time clock." (p. 212) According to Shaw, the stress, fatigue, and apprehension associated with family time reflect the high and difficult-to-meet normative standards of contemporary parenting, which compel parents to spend as much time as possible with their children while engaging with them in activities believed to foster children's development ([Daly, 2001](#); [Hays, 1996](#); [Nelson, 2011](#); [Stearns, 2003](#)). Consistent with this trend, [Roxburgh \(2012\)](#) found that worries about time with children were associated with increased depression among parents.

Altogether, these findings suggest that the meaning of childcare time for parents' well-being is complex, and that there is a need for a thorough examination of the association between time with children and parents' emotions, an issue that has not been systematically studied in quantitative research. Using the ESM, the major goal of the present study is to address this lacuna by examining the emotional correlates of parental time with children and assessing whether they vary by type of activity and the parent's gender.

2.2. Gender differences in parental time with children

Gender differences in parental time with children have been widely documented. Despite fathers' increased involvement in childcare in the past three decades ([Bianchi et al., 2006](#); [Cabrera et al., 2000](#); [Sayer et al., 2004](#); [Townsend, 2002](#)), mothers still bear the major responsibility for childcare and spend a larger proportion of their time in the company of children than fathers do ([Bianchi et al., 2006](#); [Craig and Mullan, 2011](#); [Fuligni and Brooks-Gunn, 2004](#); [Milkie et al., 2004](#); [Milkie et al., 2010](#)). The gender gap in time spent with children is even more pronounced in analyses that examine childcare as a secondary activity because mothers more than fathers tend to combine childcare with other activities such as housework ([Craig, 2006, 2007](#); [Offer and Schneider, 2011](#); [Sayer, 2007](#); [Zick and Bryant, 1996](#)) and leisure ([Arendell, 2001](#); [Mattingly and Bianchi, 2003](#)). This pattern suggests that childcare may be more constraining for mothers than fathers because even if the main focus of the parent is not on the child, childcare as a background activity still requires the parent's presence and at least some of the parent's attention ([Craig and Bittman, 2008](#); [Folbre, 2007](#)).

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