



POLICY BRIEF



CANADIAN RESEARCH
INSTITUTE *for* SOCIAL POLICY

RAISING AND LEVELLING THE BAR FOR CHILDREN & YOUTH

RAISING AND LEVELLING THE BAR

The time parents devote to their children is a major form of investment—one that is strongly linked with children's well-being and development. The time pressures to which today's parents are subjected to would suggest that parents are devoting less time to their children as compared to 30 or 40 years ago. But in fact, time use data from Canada, the United States and several other industrialized countries suggest exactly the opposite. Today's parents are spending substantially more time with their children.

The study summarized in this Policy Brief looks at historical trends in parental time in 16 industrialized countries. The authors examine how much time today's parents are devoting to their children as compared to 40 years ago. The authors rely on time use surveys collected between 1961 and 2000. The surveys allow them to estimate parental time by sex and labour force status in a cross national context. For Canada, the surveys give detailed estimates by type of childcare activities.

Are Parents Investing More or Less Time in Children?

Trends in Selected Industrialized Countries

Anne H. Gauthier, University of Calgary
Timothy M. Smeeding, Syracuse University
Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., University of Pennsylvania

KEY POINTS:

- Parents in the 1990s devoted about one hour per day more to child-related activities than their predecessors in the 1960s.
- Parents have been able to preserve the time they spend with their children by sacrificing other activities, including sleep.
- One possible explanation for the increase in parental time is that changes in societal norms may have called for increased time reading to or playing with children, and for fathers to be more involved in their children's lives.
- Paid work does not appear to impinge on parental time. Employed parents devote slightly less time to their children than non-employed parents, but the difference is much less than the difference in the number of hours of paid work.
- The increase in parental time has been especially strong for fathers. In the 1970s full-time employed married fathers' time allocation to childcare represented only 36% of mothers' time. By the 1990s it had increased to 53% (for all countries).
- Mothers continue to devote more time to childcare than fathers—even when both parents are employed full time, but the gender gap has narrowed.
- Better-educated parents tend to devote more time to childcare and provide a richer variety of caring activities to their children.

Introduction

It is 6pm and Rosie is hungry. She helps herself to cookies and nibbles them on the kitchen floor. Pots are boiling over and her mother's feet stick to the ceramic tiles which never seem clean. Rosie wants to colour. Unfortunately the walls and floors are her canvas of choice. Her father looks up from his laptop and hands her a crayon anyway. He'll clean it later. A simple dinner is served with an eye on the clock and the tedious repetition of children's music in the background. It is now 9:30pm. With the kitchen tidied, lunches made, a load of laundry folded, toys put away, and bath time, snack time, reading time and bedtime now complete, the parents may have a moment to themselves.

Today's parents are under significant time pressure. There are not enough hours in the day to do everything that needs to be done. But, despite this time pressure, they have managed to preserve and even increase time devoted to their children. Parents in the 1990s devoted about one hour per day more to child-related activities than their predecessors in the 1960s. Parents have been able to preserve the time they spend with their children by sacrificing other activities, including sleep. This trend is observed for both employed and non-employed parents and suggests a major change in parents' time allocation.

A recent study by Anne H. Gauthier and colleagues (2004) provides estimates of time spent by parents on childcare activities since the early 1960s. The authors used 24-hour time use diaries from 16 industrialized countries, including Canada, to analyze the types of activities in which parents spend their time to see if today's mothers and fathers really are spending more time with their children. Building on earlier work, especially the research of Bianchi (2000), and Sayer, Bianchi and Robinson (2004), the study focuses on 4 questions: 1) what are the trends in parental time devoted to children in industrialized countries since the 1960s?; 2) how has the increase in parental time been "financed" by sacrifices in other activities?; 3) what types of childcare activities have benefited most from an increase in parental time?; and 4) what has been the trend in the difference between the time that mothers and fathers devote to childcare?

Background

Several demographic changes have taken place in families and households since the 1960s: 1) decline in fertility and a major increase of women in the labour force; 2) postponement of key life cycle transitions, especially the transition to parenthood; 3) increase in education levels of the population; 4) greater gender equity (with variances seen across countries); and 5) increasing diversity of family forms (van de Kaa, 1987; Billari & Wilson, 2001).

This demographic transformation has altered the social and economic context in which children grow up and by extension, parents' investment in children. For instance, there is evidence that better educated

parents tend to devote more time to their children. Research shows that middle-aged husbands spend more time doing housework than do younger husbands (South & Spitze, 1994), and recent studies suggest that step fathers may not possess the same level of commitment to their non-biological children as biological fathers (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Far less is known about changes in parenting styles. The switch from quantity to quality in the classical economic fertility theory (Becker, 1965) suggests one such behavioural effect. It is also possible that changes in societal norms may have called for increased time reading to or playing with children and for fathers to be more involved in their children's lives.

Analysis

The study by Gauthier and colleagues examines parents' quantitative investment in children (measured by the number of hours devoted to childcare) and the nature of this investment according to five main activities: 1) paid work and education; 2) housework; 3) childcare; 4) leisure; and 5) personal activities including sleeping and eating. Childcare activities consist of: 1) personal care given to children, including health care; 2) help, including teaching and reprimanding children; 3) reading and conversing with children; 4) playing with children; 5) other care; and 6) travel related to children. The sum of the activities recorded in the diaries is equal to 24 hours.

The authors restrict the analysis to primary activities, that is, the main activity carried out at any time during the day. This limitation is important to note since estimates of parental time based only on primary activities are known to underestimate the total time which parents devote to children given that a large fraction of childcare activities are carried out in parallel to other activities (Zick & Bryant, 1996). The analysis provides estimates of parental time for two-parent families with at least one child under the age of 5, and estimates by labour force status of the respondents.

To capture global trends in parental time the authors based their research on the Multinational Time Use Study, a multi-country dataset, which focuses on the allocation of time to a wide variety of activities. The estimates are daily averages weighted to ensure equal representation of every day of the week. The authors also used a Canadian data set to examine the nature of parental time activities and the way these activities are "financed". Multivariate analysis (a Tobit Regression Model) was used to control for some of the historical changes in the characteristics of the population.

Results

The Great Balancing Act. Paid work does not appear to impinge on parental time. Employed parents devote slightly less time to their children, but the difference is much less than the difference in the number of hours of paid work. Both employed and non-employed mothers have increased the time they

spend on childcare. This trend suggests major behavioural changes in the population that have resulted in more not less time being devoted to children. Results from the regression analysis suggest that even after controlling for characteristics such as employment status and education, a statistically significant historical increase in parental time is observed. In Canada, parental time spent on childcare in 1998 still exceeded that spent in 1971 by over one hour per day for men, but only by a half an hour for women.

Devoted Dads. The increase in parental time has been especially strong for fathers. In the 1970s full-time employed married fathers' time allocation to childcare represented only 36% of mothers' time. By the 1990s it had increased to 53% (for all countries). Canadian and American fathers spend more time doing child related activities compared to fathers in other countries. They devoted about 1.4 hours per day to such activities in the 1990s. This is 30 minutes more than German and Australian fathers and nearly 50 minutes more than Italian fathers.

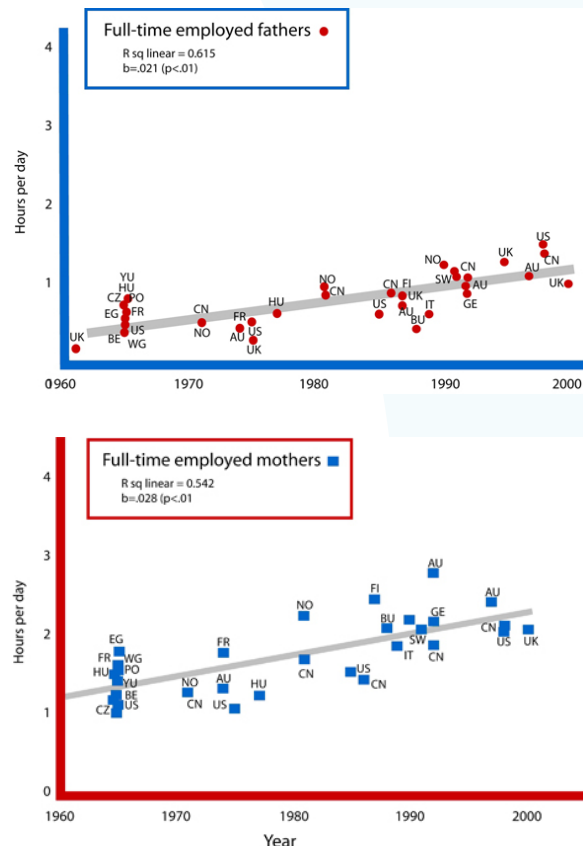
Super Moms. In Canada, full-time employed married mothers have increased their allocation of time to childcare activities from 1.2 hours per day in 1971 to 2.1 hours in 1998 and for non-employed mothers from 2.7 hours per day in 1971 to 3.5 hours in 1998. The cross-national differences for mothers are smaller than for fathers, with full-time employed Canadian mothers spending the same time on child related activities as mothers in Germany and Sweden, but less time than Australian mothers.

That Enduring Gender Gap. Mothers continue to devote more time to childcare than fathers - even when both parents are employed full-time, but the gender gap has narrowed in most of the countries sampled including Canada. When it comes to activities such as playing and reading to the child, fathers' and mothers' time are very similar. The large difference is observed with regard to general childcare including infant care and child personal care for which mothers continue to be the main provider. It is still more common for mothers than for fathers to make adjustments at work to accommodate family needs (Lee & Duxbury, 1998).

Juggling Precious Minutes. Activities that involve a higher degree of parent-child interaction such as playing appear to have been responsible for the overall increase in parental time, along with time spent on personal care of children. Parents preserve their time with children by sacrificing time devoted to leisure (e.g. watching TV) and personal activities, especially sleeping. Fathers are devoting more time to housework and mothers have decreased time de-

voted to housework. Since the 1960s, fathers and mothers have reduced the amount of time devoted to paid work and non-employed mothers seem to spend more time driving children from one place to another.

Figure 1. Mean time spent on childcare activities (hours per day) for married or cohabiting parents with at least one child under the age of five 1961-2000



Educational Differences. This study confirms past research (Hill & Stafford, 1973, 1985; Leibowitz, 1974; Gronau, 1977) that better-educated parents tend to devote more time to childcare. Parents with post-secondary education have been devoting about 30 minutes per day to child-related activities more than parents with a high school education or less. More educated parents are presumably more aware of the positive influence of parent-child shared activities on children's development, and they believe that they are producing "higher-quality" children who are better prepared to make a successful transition to adulthood (Gauthier et al., 2004).

About CRISP

The Canadian Research Institute for Social Policy (CRISP) is a multi-disciplinary research organization dedicated to: conducting policy research aimed at improving the education and care of Canadian children and youth, contributing to the training of social scientists in quantitative research methods, and supporting low-income countries in their efforts to build research capacity in child development.

About the Research

CRISP's Raising and Levelling the Bar research program brings together a multidisciplinary team of researchers from across Canada to explore specific factors that can contribute to the improvement of outcomes for Canada's young people. The core of the program is longitudinal research on children's development based on children's growth trajectories from birth to entry to the labour market. The program is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council's Initiative on the New Economy.

The Multinational Time Use Study (MTUS) is a project aimed at developing and documenting internationally comparable time diary and demographic information. The project is a collaboration of individuals, universities, and agencies from around the world including the University of Calgary and St. Mary's University in Canada. Gauthier, Smeeding & Furstenberg (2004) used data from 16 industrialized countries (Australia (AU), Belgium (BE), Bulgaria (BU), Canada (CN), the former Czechoslovakia (CZ), Finland (FI), France (FR), Germany (GE), Hungary (HU), Italy (IT), Norway (NO), Poland (PO), Sweden (SW), the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US), and the former Yugoslavia (YU)). The heterogeneous characteristics of the sample ensure that the results are not specific to one or a few countries but capture a more general societal trend.

About this Policy Brief

CRISP's Policy Briefs are designed to highlight key policy implications of research findings. They are available in paper form and electronically on CRISP's website at www.unb.ca/crisp/pbrief.html. The main analysis in this Policy Brief was carried out by Anne H. Gauthier, University of Calgary, Timothy M. Smeeding, Syracuse University, and Frank F. Furstenberg Jr., University of Pennsylvania (Gauthier, Smeeding & Furstenberg, 2004). Stacey Wilson-Forsberg, Knowledge Transfer Manager CRISP drafted the brief.

Further Reading

- Becker, Gary S. (1965). A Theory of the Allocation of Time. *The Economic Journal* 75 (299): 493-517.
- Bianchi, Suzanne. (2000). Maternal Employment and Time With Children: Dramatic Change or Surprising Continuity? *Demography* 37 (4): 401-414.
- Billari, Francesco & Wilson, Chris. (2001). Convergence Towards Diversity? Cohort Dynamics in the Transition to Adulthood in Contemporary Western Europe. MPIDR Working Paper WP2001-039.
- Gauthier, Anne H., Smeeding, Timothy M., & Furstenberg, Jr., Frank F. (2004). Are Parents Investing Less Time in Children? Trends in Selected Industrialized Countries. *Population and Development Review*, 30 (4): 647-671.
- Gronau, Reuben. (1977). Leisure, Home Production and Work: the Theory of the Allocation of Time Revisited. *Journal of Political Economy* 85 (6): 1099-1123.
- Hill, C. Russell & Stafford, Frank P. (1973). Allocation of Time to Preschool Children and Educational Opportunity. *The Journal of Human Resources* 9 (3): 323-341.
- Hill, C. Russell & Stafford, Frank P. (1985). Parental Care of Children: Time Diary Estimates of Quantity, Predictability, and Variety, in F. Thomas Juster and Frank P. Stafford (eds.), *Time, Goods, and Well-Being*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, pp. 415-437.
- Lee, Catherine M. & Duxbury, Linda. (1998). Employed Parents' Support from Partners, Employers, and Friends. *The Journal of Social Psychology* 138 (3): 303-322.
- Leibowitz, Arleen. (1974). Home Investments in Children. *The Journal of Political Economy* 82 (2) Part 2: S111-S131.
- McLanahan, Sara & Sandefur, Gary. (1994) *Growing Up With a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sayer, Liana C., Bianchi, Suzanne M. & Robinson, John M. (2004). Are Parents Investing Less in Children? Trends in Mothers' and Fathers' Time With Children. *American Journal of Sociology* 10 (1): 1-43.
- South, Scott J. & Spitze, Glenna. (1994). Housework in Marital and Non-Marital Households. *American Sociological Review* 59: 327-347.
- VandeKaa, Dirk J. (1987). Europe's Second Demographic Transition. *Population Bulletin* 42 (1): 1-59.
- Zick, C.D. & Bryant, W.K. (1996). A New Look at Parents' Time Spent in Childcare: Primary and Secondary Time Use. *Social Science Research* 25: 260-280.