

US parents enjoy time with children—but moms feel more strain

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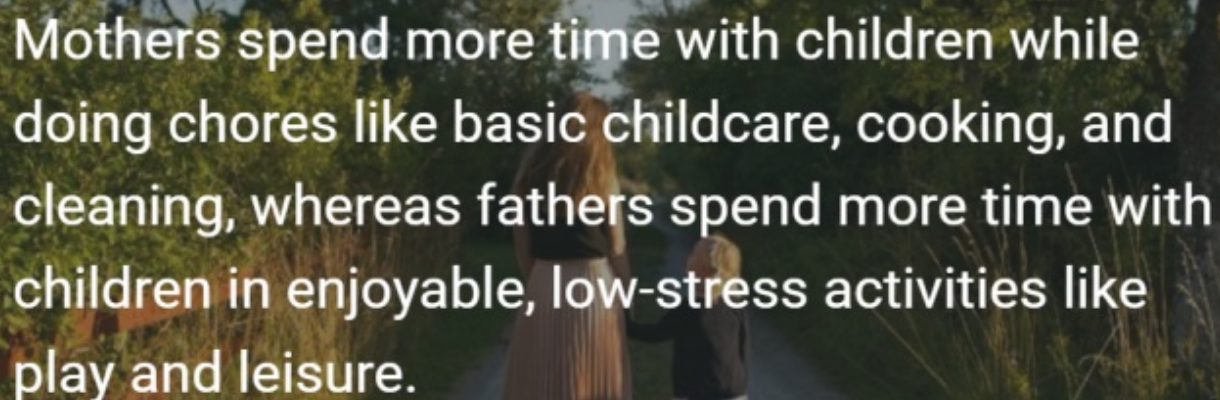
Compared to past decades, children receive more time, effort, and interest from their parents. While this is likely to be of benefit to children, what are the impacts on the well-being of parents? In new research, which examines time diary data from over 12,000 respondents between 2010 and 2013, [Kelly Musick](#), [Ann Meier](#) and [Sarah Flood](#) find that mothers spend more time with children performing chores such as basic childcare and housework, while fathers spend more time with children in leisure activities. Mothers and fathers also differ in the quantity and quality of their downtime. The disparities in stress and fatigue that mothers and fathers experience in their different activities throughout the day can be linked to lower levels of parental well-being.



Parenting in the US—and elsewhere—has become more time-intensive and child-centered than it used to be. This shift is widely assumed to have positive effects on kids, but what about mom and dad? Implications for parental well-being are less clear. In new work, we find that parents enjoy the time they spend with their children. They experience greater happiness and meaning and less sadness, stress, and fatigue in activities with children compared to time without their children. But parenting carries more strain for mothers. In our study, mothers reported more stress and fatigue and less happiness in parenting than fathers.



We rely on nationally representative time diary data linked to more than 12,000 respondents and their feelings in over 36,000 activities from the 2010, 2012, and 2013 well-being module of the American Time Use Survey. Our results show that how mothers and fathers spend time with children accounts for some of the gap in how they experience parenting. Mothers spend more time with children while doing chores like basic childcare, cooking, and cleaning, whereas fathers spend more time with children in enjoyable, low-stress activities like play and leisure. *Most of fathers' time with children is spent in leisure activities like TV or downtime.*



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- Kelly Musick, Ann Meier and Sarah Flood

Mothers and fathers also differ in the quantity and quality of their downtime. Although mothers get 27 minutes more

sleep than fathers, they also suffer more sleep interruptions than fathers, with 16 percent of mothers experiencing three or more sleep episodes compared to 9 percent of fathers, indicating lower sleep quality. Mothers spend significantly less time in leisure than do fathers (11 minutes less), and a greater proportion of their leisure time is with children only: just over 6 hours or 19 percent of all leisure for mothers versus 9 percent of all leisure for fathers. Mothers also experience more interrupted leisure than fathers, with 27 percent of mothers reporting leisure time interrupted by childcare at least twice during the day compared to 14 percent of fathers, suggesting less continuous and relaxing free time. Mothers engaged in activities with their children are also significantly more likely to be solo parenting: 49 percent of mothers' activities with children do not include another adult present compared to 32 percent of fathers' activities. This is true, in part, because women are much more likely than men to be parenting without a spouse or partner in the household. These differences are all in turn associated with lower levels of parental well-being.

Our work shows how contemporary parenting continues to be woven differently into the lives of mothers and fathers, contributing to our understanding of parental well-being in three key ways. First, we focus on well-being tied directly to how parents spend their time, shedding new light on the day-to-day context of parenting. Second, we assess the *costs and rewards* of parenting, showing that the mix of joy and strain in parenting indeed differs for mothers and fathers. Finally, we capture differences in mothers' and fathers' parenting that often go unexplored, for example, details about what parents are doing and who else is present in a broad array of parenting activities, not just time in direct care activities.

Our findings raise important questions that go beyond what the data can tell us: Would families be better off if mothers, like fathers, spent less time overall with children, engaged in more enjoyable activities with children, and carved out more downtime? Are mothers' time allocations necessary to "cover the goal," or could parental roles be redefined to allow both mothers and fathers more flexibility in their time with children? These are important questions with implications for family well-being.

This article is based on the paper, 'How Parents Fare', in the American Sociological Review.

Featured *image* credit: [Jon Flobrant](#) (Unsplash, CC-0)

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor the London School of Economics.

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Kelly Musick is Professor of Policy Analysis and Management and Director of the Cornell Population Center. Her research focuses on family change and social inequality. She has published on women's childbearing intentions, the quality and stability of cohabiting relationships, social class differences in family formation, and the mechanisms linking family environments and child well-being. Current projects address issues at the intersection of parenting, work, and well-being from a cross-national perspective. Musick's research has been supported by grants from NICHD, the Russell Sage Foundation, and the Swedish Research Council.



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Ann Meier is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Minnesota and faculty affiliate of the Minnesota Population Center. Her research focuses on child and parent well-being across family context and broader social contexts. She has published work on adolescent and young adult sexuality and romantic relationships, child well-being in various family situations, and parental well-being by gender, employment status, and single-parenthood.



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Sarah Flood is Director of US Survey Projects at the Minnesota Population Center at the University of Minnesota, where she oversees projects funded by the National Institutes of Health to develop, support, and improve population data infrastructure. Her research is at the intersection of gender, work, family, life course, and time use. She has published work on the time use and well-being of parents, couples, and older adults.



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