

Parents' Time with Children:
Patterns in Diverse Family Contexts*

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ABSTRACT

Background and Significance

Scholarship on patterns of parental time involvement with children in the U.S. has increased in recent years. The substantive focus this body of literature varies. Some studies focus on parental time with children (e.g., childcare), often with the aim of tracking change over time or examining patterns for mothers and/or fathers (e.g., Bianchi 2000; Folbre et al. 2005; Sandberg and Hofferth 2001; Sayer, Bianchi, and Robinson 2004; Yeung et al. 2001). Others focus on the issue of gender and the household division of labor and include time spent in childcare in analyses (e.g., Mattingly and Bianchi 2003; Sayer 2005)

Few studies, however, have as their chief aim an understanding of parental time involvement with children across diverse family forms. The few studies on parental time with children that do forefront family structure either do not use time diary data, arguably the best means of measuring time use (e.g., Bianchi 2000) or do not include a wide array of various family forms such as cohabiting families (Cooksey et al. 1997; Hofferth and Sandberg 2001; Stewart 1999).

The key contribution of this paper is to elaborate extant knowledge by examining time spent with children in a diverse array of *two-parent* family structures. We limit our investigation to households with two coresidential “romantically” involved adults (e.g., first marriage, remarriage, and cohabitation) because a deepened understanding of the heterogeneity of two-parent households as environments for children is important empirically and conceptually. Historically, many studies on child well-being and the ramifications of family change more generally have used single-parent households as the key contrast, with differences among two-parent households de-emphasized and sometimes obscured. Through our emphasis on households with two parents, or at least one biological and one potential parental figure, this paper may lead to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between family structure and child well-being.

A second contribution of this paper is that we investigate patterns using data at two time points: 1997 and 2003. While this is a relatively short time-span, this comparison provides important leverage on the robustness of patterns that emerge. Additionally, the family landscape is rapidly changing. To take but one example, recent data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) suggest that over 60% of women ages 25-39 have cohabited at least once (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2006). Comparable figures for the same age group from the 1995 NSFG, just seven years earlier, is 47-49%

(Bumpass and Lu 2000). Thus, and considering Cherlin (2004) argument that even marriage is becoming “de-institutionalized,” it is possible that shifts in patterns may be detected. Attempting to explain change over a mere six-year time period is quite challenging, and we will be appropriately cautious in our interpretation. Our interpretation will also be informed by two theoretical perspectives. One is that families that were less “institutionalized” in the past are developing strategies that minimize perceptions of difference from two-biological-parent, first married families. Such strategies may well include emergent norms about biological parent and parental figures’ time investments in children. Alternatively, if “first marriage has become more like remarriage” (Cherlin 2004: p. 848), it may be that it has also become more like cohabiting families. This view would imply that patterns do not vary markedly across family types and some convergence in patterns may be observed.

Data and Analytic Strategy

We rely on the time diary files of the Child Development Supplement (CDS) of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), 1997 and 2003. For both waves, the data were collected in a paper format, and mailed to the respondent along with instructions about how to complete the diary. Respondents were subsequently contacted via an in-home interview or telephone interview and asked to provide the diary information to the interviewer.

The children in the sample were age 0-12 in 1997 and approximately age 6-18 during the school year as of 2002-2003. Because of the sample design, including children ages 0-12 in 1997 and age 6-18 in 2003, only the younger age group of 6-12 is present in both the 1997 and 2003 data.

Thus, our analysis is restricted to pre-teen children (i.e., 6-12 year olds), resulting in a sample size of 1447 children in 1997 and 1569 children in 2003 (a total of 3016 children). This is also the age group more likely to spend time with parents than teenagers and are old enough to fill out the time diary themselves than 0-6 year olds, reducing the likelihood of proxy report error.

Variables. Our dependent variable is total time that a child reported she or he spent with a coresident parent measured as minutes per week. We include time in which parents are directly involved and as well as passive involvement, because focusing on direct involvement only underestimates the amount of parenting that takes place (Folbre et al 2005). In our analyses, we also use separate measures representing an intersection of gender and family type (e.g., time spent with the biological mother, biological father, stepmother and stepfather). Numerous studies have found that women spend more time with children than men (Bianchi 2000; Folbre et al. 2005; Sayer, Bianchi and Robinson 2004).

We measure family types across three union types (i.e., parental first marriage, remarriage, or cohabitation) by drawing on information from the core PSID data collection. Our sample sizes for each family type are: 1583 first marriages, 290 remarriages and 179 cohabitations. The remaining 964 cases are single persons.

Control variables in multivariate models include: sex of the child, age of the child, age of the coresident parents, sex of the parents, number of children in the household, race of the child, family income, and education of the coresident parents. Cognitive ability, as measured by a digit span memory score, is also included to proxy for the level of care that a child needs.

Analytic Strategy. We plan to present a series of descriptive findings. These will show median and mean time spent with children for each family type, by gender of parent/parental figure, and for the two time periods. We test for statistically significant differences across family type, time period, and gender.

Our multivariate analyses employ Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) and Tobit regression techniques. These estimation approaches have been used in previous studies, depending on how many observations have zero minutes as an outcome. The primary goal of the multivariate analysis is to build on, and better understand, the descriptive results by attempting to account for any differentials that emerge (e.g., over time, by family type). While we have described a basic set of control variables above, the CDS contains a rich set of measures, including some that could plausibly mediate the relationship between family type and time with children.

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