

Do Australians Share Parenting? Time-diary evidence on fathers' and mothers' time with children.

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Abstract

Despite the growing social acceptance of the ideal of shared parenting, mothers spend much more time with their children than fathers do. Women spend three times as long as men in child care as a main activity. Do mothers and fathers also spend their time caring for children differently?

The Australian Bureau of Statistics Time Use Survey 1997, which sampled over 4000 randomly selected households, provides an opportunity to explore these differences. Based on respondents keeping a record of their daily activity in a time-diary, the survey provides accurate information about the start and finish time of activities, simultaneous activities, the location of activities and the company present. Analysis of the Time Use Survey shows there are profound differences in the way time with children is spent relatively by each sex. Fathers spend a high proportion of their time with children in play activities. Compared to fathers, mothers are disproportionately responsible for the physical care of children. When Mum plays with her child, she is more likely than Dad to be doing something else at the same time. Men are less likely than women to do the routine childcare tasks that have to be done at a certain time. Women are far more likely than men to be alone with their children. Fathers sacrifice less of their leisure than mothers do, and they help out, rather than take full responsibility for childcare. This paper argues that gender differences in parenting go beyond mere inequality in the duration of time spent with children. There are also differences in how that time is spent. This has implications for gender equity, and women's ability to balance work and family.

1 Introduction

Shared parenting is a topic of both expert and popular interest. Largely following the entry of women into the work force the model of appropriate fatherhood has changed from distant breadwinner to modern involved dad (Griswold 1993). Currently an ideal of father as co-parent is emerging (Pleck and Pleck 1997; Cabrera and Tamis-LeMonda 1999).

Shared parenting is regarded a very good thing. This is from many different perspectives. The benefits of most interest in this paper are that it is thought to be a way to improve domestic gender equity and help women balance the demands of work and family (Hochschild and Machung 1989; Folbre and Badgett 1999; Joshi and Davies 1999).

Father involvement is also advocated by experts in other fields. It is said to improve developmental outcomes for children (Lamb 1997; Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda et al. 1999; Silverstein and Auerbach 1999; Yeung, Hill et al. 2000) and to give fathers a better work life balance (Biddulph 1994; Petre 1998; McMahan 1999). It is advocated as a way to avoid a parenting deficit, which could have adverse social consequences (Hewlett, Rankin et al. 2002), and to improve father-child relationships (which could be of particular importance following divorce/separation) (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991; Seltzer and Brandreth 1994; Coltrane 1996).

Shared parenting also has widespread popular support. In attitude surveys, both men and women express strongly egalitarian attitudes towards parenting (Castleman and Reed 2003). But because a social practice is generally regarded as desirable, it doesn't mean it's actually happening. Often changes in social attitudes run ahead of actual behaviour. Research shows that most people have strongly egalitarian values about the domestic division of labour, and think that housework should be shared between men and women (Bittman and Pixley 1997). Studies have found that, if asked, most couples claim they *do* share it (Bittman and Pixley 1997; Dempsey 2001). But when actual behaviour is investigated, research consistently finds that women do far more housework than men ((Bittman and Pixley 1997; Dempsey 2001)Baxter 2002).

Research Aim

The aim of this paper is to establish whether the strong popular and expert approval of shared parenting is reflected in practice. The research aim, therefore, is to establish the extent to which fathers currently share parenting in Australia, through a gender comparison of time allocated to children.

Research Focus

Researchers into involved fatherhood make the point that parental involvement can't be deduced simply from the amount of time parents spend with children, but also requires an understanding of how that time is spent (Lamb, Pleck et al. 1987; Pleck and Pleck 1997). So, this analysis is split into two parts.

1. Absolute time, which is the total amount of time parents spend looking after children.

However, even this is not straightforward. Absolute time can be calculated in many ways, of which I have chosen three. First, and most simply, the amount of time parents spend with children doing childcare as a main activity. But two to three times as much childcare is done as a secondary, or accompanying, activity than as a main activity [Bittman, 1999 #109; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1992 #204; Ironmonger, 1996 #244; Schwartz, 1999 #239] (Craig 2002). .

For instance, in time when a parent is cooking while supervising homework, the cooking would usually be the main activity and supervising the homework would be the secondary activity.

There are several reasons for counting secondary activity. Calculating time in only the main activity significantly undercounts the amount of time parents commit to children. It ignores time the parents are not actively engaged in childcare, but are available to be called upon by the child (Bryant and Zick 1996). It doesn't reflect the constraint involved in being responsible for monitoring children (Sullivan 1997) and it conceals the harder work involved in doing more than one thing at a time (McMahon 1999). So a more accurate way of counting time in childcare would include both primary and secondary activity.

Third, some commentators suggest that parents' time commitment to children is not limited to when they are doing actual childcare, and that all time in the company of children is a more useful measure (Folbre forthcoming).

2. Second, relative time, which analyses the way parents spend the time that they are with children on a proportional basis. There are also many ways of doing this. I have chosen four.

First, I compare by sex the type of childcare tasks performed. Some childcare tasks are more pleasant than others. Also, some are more urgent, and some have to be done to a routine. Research into housework practices shows that men disproportionately perform the irregular household tasks that don't have to be done at a particular time, such as mowing the lawn or fixing the guttering. This means they can choose when to do the tasks. In contrast, women usually do the jobs that have to be done at a particular time like routine shopping, cooking and cleaning (Meissner, Humphreys et al. 1975) (Myrdal and Klein 1968; Oakley 1974; Bittman and Matheson 1996; Dempsey 1997; Sullivan 1997) (McMahon 1999; Baxter 2002). Comparing time in particular childcare tasks will show whether this pattern also pertains for childcare. It will show whether fathers are also doing proportionately more of the pleasant and the irregular childcare activities. If they are, it means that women's childcare care schedules are more arduous and less flexible, which makes it more difficult to accommodate paid work.

Second I look at the proportion of childcare time that parents are doing more than one thing at a time, which indicates how pressured the time is, to see if this is similar for men and women.

Third, I compare the proportion of time that parents spend with their children that is in sole charge. This follows previous research that shows that the more relative time someone spends doing a task in the presence of others who are also doing it, the less they take responsibility for the whole job. They are usually acting as a helper, under instruction or supervision from the person who has the main responsibility (Sullivan 1997).

Two main consequences could arise if fathers are rarely alone with their children. First, their relationship with the children is always mediated by the mother, and second, they are not substituting for their wives time. They are not relieving her of the responsibility in a way that would allow her to pursue other activities, such as paid work.

Fourth, I look at the proportion of leisure time that is child free.

1.1 Data

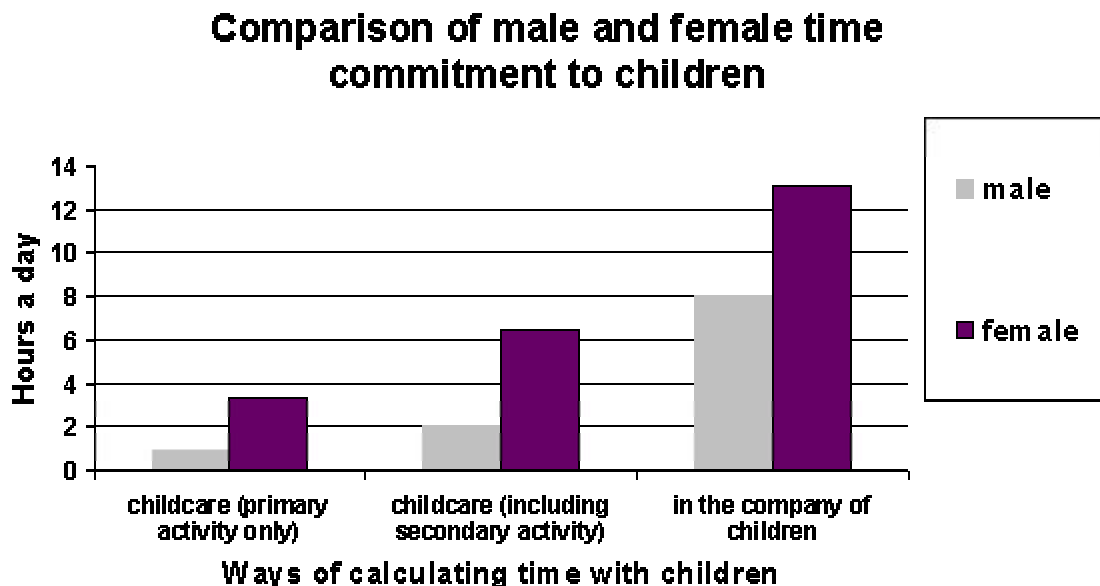
All the data are drawn from the Australian Bureau of Statistics Time Use Survey 1997, which randomly sampled over 4000 households. It required all members of the households who were over 15 to complete a time-diary, recording all of their activities over two days, in 5-minute intervals. For this study, I created a sub-sample consisting of partners in couple headed families with at least one child under 12 (N=1463)

The results are all drawn from Ordinary Least Squares regression analysis, undertaken separately for men and women. The dependent variables are time spent in the various categories of childcare, controlling for age, qualifications, employment status, spouse's hours in paid work, age of youngest child, hours in extra-household childcare, household income, day of the week and whether there is a disabled person in the household. Then, for the section on relative time, the hours for each sub-category were calculated as proportions of the whole.

1.2 Results

1a. Absolute time

This graph of absolute time with children shows that whichever method you use to calculate it, women spend much longer doing childcare or being with children than men do.



The first columns show time in childcare as a main (primary) activity. Fathers spend about an hour a day in childcare as a main activity, mothers 3 hours a day.

The second columns show time in childcare as either a primary or a secondary activity. Fathers spend about 2 hours a day in childcare as either a main or a simultaneous activity, mothers spend over 6 hours a day.

When the measure is “in the company of children” as it is for the third set of columns, fathers can be seen to spend about 8 hours, and mothers more than 13 hours a day with children.

2. Relative time

Table 1.1 Proportion (%) of childcare time

Childcare activity category	Primary		Primary and secondary	
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother
Interactive care	40	22	30	25
Physical care	31	51	13	21
Travel/communication	13	17	05	07
Passive care	16	10	52	47
Total	100	100	100	100

Source Abs 1997 Time Use Survey

Table 1 breaks childcare time down into four categories; interactive care, (which is playing with, reading to, talking to or reprimanding children), physical care (bathing, feeding etc), travel and communication associated with children, and passive care, which is simply watching children.

The first two columns of the table show the proportion of their childcare time that each gender allocates to these tasks as a main activity. Men spend 40% of their childcare time talking or playing with children, while women spend 22%. Men spend 31% of their time in physical care of children, whereas women spend 51%. So the activities that are arguably the most pleasant (interactive care) and the activities that are the most arduous (physical care) are both unevenly distributed on a relative basis by sex.

The last two columns in this table show the proportion of time spent in each category of childcare if both primary and secondary activity is counted. Men's interactive care time is still by far the largest category, as it was for main activity only. But there has been a change for women. When secondary activity is counted, time talking or playing is also the largest proportion of childcare activity category for women.

The lower table shows how this occurs. This table shows the proportion of time in each category that is done as a main activity, that is, while not trying to do something else more pressing at the same time. Most tasks don't differ much on this basis by sex. Physical care and travel and communication are usually main activities whoever performs them.

But for interactive care, there is a substantial difference. Women do only a 3rd of their interactive care as a main activity, whereas for men, during nearly $\frac{1}{2}$ of the time they are playing with or talking to or reading to children, it is either their primary focus, or the only thing they are doing. Women increase the proportion of their childcare time that is spent in interactive care by doing more things at once. So women have to work harder than men in order to get time in these valued and pleasant activities (which could affect how pleasant they actually are in practice).

Table 2 firstly shows the proportion of leisure time that parents have without simultaneously looking after children. The top two rows present the proportion of parental leisure time of mothers and fathers, first when they are not undertaking childcare as a secondary activity, and second, when they are enjoying leisure without children present at all.

Table 1.2 Proportion (%) of childcare as primary activity

Childcare activity category	Father	Mother
Interactive care	49	34
Physical care	89	90
Travel/communication	96	97
Passive care	11	08
Total	37	38

Source 1997 ABS Time Use Survey

A woman with a pre-schooler has 65% of her leisure while not doing childcare at the same time. Only 17% of her leisure time is completely childfree. After her youngest child is at school, 78% of her leisure is not done at the same time as childcare, but she continues to spend all but 17% of her total leisure in the company of children. A man with a youngest child under school age has 80% of his leisure time without having to do childcare at the same time. With a school-aged youngest child, he has 86% of his leisure time without also doing childcare.

With any age of child, fathers average all but 20% of their leisure time with children present. The difference in the time when children are present during leisure time differs only slightly on the basis of sex (17% vs 20%). The larger discrepancy is in the amount of secondary childcare undertaken during leisure time. This means that during leisure mothers are monitoring children for a substantially higher proportion of the time than fathers are. Though fathers are with children for nearly as high a proportion of their leisure time as mothers, they are not simultaneously supervising them to the same proportional extent that mothers are. In consequence, mothers' leisure is less leisured than is fathers'.

Second, this table presents the proportion of time that parents perform childcare without their spouse present, and the time they are alone with children, whether or not they are performing childcare tasks. About a quarter of male time doing childcare is done in sole charge of the children, compared to 60% for a woman with a preschool child, and 70% for a woman with a school aged child.

The discrepancy is even greater when not just childcare time but all time with children is included in the count. Women spend nearly half of their time with children alone; men spend 16-18% of their time with children alone. This means that men are much more often helping out with childcare rather than taking over responsibility for it. The father's presence is an adjunct to the mother's. So men's relationships with children are usually mediated through the mother, and, of more interest in this paper, they are not substituting for their wives time in a way that could offer her opportunities to do other things, such as enter the paid work force.

2 Summary of Findings

- Absolute time with children remains very different by sex. That is fairly uncontentious. But it is also apparent that
 - Relative time with children is also spent differently by sex
 - Fathers have more play/talk time with children (childcare is more like leisure for men and work for women)
 - Fathers have more choice of when they do childcare (childcare schedules are flexible for men and inflexible for women)
 - Fathers are less likely to do other things at the same time (job is harder with more tasks at once)
 - Fathers spend relatively more of their leisure time without doing childcare at the same time (women get fewer real breaks)
 - Fathers are rarely alone with children (assist/help, so women are not relieved of responsibility for job)

Conclusion

This examination of actual behaviour shows that the very widespread social and expert approval of shared parenting is not reflected in current practice. This has negative implications for domestic equity and women's work force participation. Men may be participating in childcare, but not in a way that really helps women meet the demands of work and family. Childcare practices are not the same for men and women, either quantitatively or qualitatively.

3 References

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