

Today's Issues

How Do Children Spend Their Time? Children's Activities, School Achievement, and Well-Being

Parents who have high expectations for their children and spend time with them have children who achieve at higher levels than other children, according to research supported by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

After taking into account race, health, and other influences beyond parents' control, the researchers found that expecting a child to finish college was associated with an increase of six full points out of a total of 100 on a child's reading test score.

The researchers also examined 13 different types of parent-children activities including homework, housework, games, and sports (see box). Children whose parents reported doing the most activities with them tended to have the highest scores on an applied math test. These findings suggest that home activities can prepare children for practical problem solving.

The study was based on a nationally representative sample of about 3,600 children under age 13, directed by Sandra Hofferth at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research. It identified a number of other factors linked to school achievement and emotional adjustment:

- **Warm relationships.** The researchers found that parents who had a warm relationship with their children — who hugged them often, and told them they love them and were proud of them — reported that their children were happier, less withdrawn, and had fewer behavior problems than others. About 66 percent of parents reported behaving warmly toward their children, including hugging their children, telling the child "I love you," and joking or playing

together several times a week. But the nature of the relationship appears to change as children age and spend more time with peers. Almost 80 percent of parents of preschoolers reported high levels of warmth in their relationships, compared with only 57 percent of parents of school-age children.

- **Reading vs. television.** While children spent little time reading — about 1.3 hours a week on average — those who read more achieved at higher levels than those who did not read at all or who read very little. In contrast, children spent 13 hours a week, on average, watching television, and those who watched more than this amount did worse on tests of verbal and math achievement than other children.

- **School involvement.** Parents who were more involved with their children's school had children who did better on achievement tests. About half the parents studied were involved in five or more different school activities in the year before they were interviewed. These activities included conferring with the teacher, principal, or counselor; presenting in the child's class or observing or volunteering in the class or school; attending a school event; and attending a PTA meeting. Almost 75 percent of parents reported having regular conversations with their children about school activities, subjects being studied, or school experiences.

- **School stability.** Children who did not change schools in the year before they were surveyed had scores on a scale of behavior problems six times lower than children who changed schools two or

Parent-Child Activities

Children whose parents reported doing the most activities with them tended to have the highest scores on an applied math test. Examples of these activities include:

- Washing or folding clothes
- Doing dishes
- Cleaning house
- Preparing food
- Looking at books or reading stories
- Talking about the family
- Working on homework together
- Building or repairing something
- Playing on the computer or video games
- Playing a board game or card game, or doing a puzzle
- Playing sports or outdoor activities
- Going shopping
- Doing arts and crafts.

more times. After accounting for other factors that affect behavior problems, the findings suggest that changing schools more than once in one year was the single biggest predictor of school problems in children ages 12 and under.

Other Differences Examined

The study also analyzed how children's well-being and test scores are related to family characteristics and health:

- **Parents' education levels.** Children with the most-educated parents tended to achieve at higher levels than other children. Children in families with more-

educated parents tended to spend more time reading and less time watching television than children of less-educated parents.

■ **Family size and structure.** Children with two or fewer siblings tended to receive higher test scores than children from larger families. Children from single-parent families had lower achievement test scores and more behavior problems than other children. Children from two-parent families in which the household head was unemployed also tended to have more behavior problems than other children. Children in single-parent families spent less time reading than children of other types of households. On average, children in dual-income families spent more time in school, less time at home playing, and watched less television than children in families where the father was employed and the mother was not employed outside the home.

■ **Health.** While 84 percent of the children studied were in excellent or very good health, according to their parents, 6 percent had fair or poor health or a health-related limitation on their activities. Health-related limitations on children's activities were linked to lower achievement test scores and more behavior problems.

Changes in How Children Spend Their Time

The study also provides the first look since 1981 at how U.S. children spend their time. The findings suggest that children are spending more time on average in day care and school, and more time accompanying their parents on errands and in household tasks, and they have less time for free play than they did in the early 1980s.

In 1997, when the data were collected, children spent about eight hours more per week in day care, preschool or school programs than they did in 1981. They also spent three hours more per week doing household work, including shopping. Children also spent about three hours less per week in unstructured play and outdoor activities than they did in 1981.

The researchers report that many of the changes in how children spend their time

Children's Weekly Time Use, 1981 and 1997* (In hours and minutes)

Activity	1981	1997	Difference
School	21:22	29:22	+8:00
Playing	15:54	12:58	-2:56
TV viewing	15:12	13:09	-2:03
Eating	9:08	8:18	-0:50
Sports	2:20	5:17	+2:57
Studying	1:25	2:07	+0:42
Reading	0:57	1:16	+0:19
Household work	2:27	5:39	+3:12

*Children ages 3-11; selected activities.

Source: 1997 Panel Study of Income Dynamics, Child Development Supplement.

are the result of widespread demographic changes in U.S. families, including increases in the number of households headed by single parents and in the number of women employed outside the home. On average, children whose mothers worked outside the home tended to spend the most time in school and day care and the least time in free play.

Less time spent eating is another indication that the work-family time crunch is affecting children, according to the researchers. Children spent about one hour less per week eating in 1997 than they did in 1981, a decrease of 10 percent. Altogether, free time — defined as time left over after eating, sleeping, personal care, and attending school, preschool or day care — decreased from 38 percent to 30 percent of a child's day. One-quarter of that free time was spent watching television (13 hours per week).

Time spent studying increased by almost 50 percent per week between 1981 and 1997. Total study time averaged more than 2 hours per week for all children; this figure appears low because it includes preschoolers who don't study at all. The time children spent in organized sports (standard team activities such as soccer, baseball, basketball, and swimming) more than doubled over the period to total more than 5 hours per week in 1997. Participation increased equally for girls and boys, but in 1997 boys spent twice as much

time in sports activities as girls did. When other factors are held equal, black and Hispanic children spent less time in sports than non-Hispanic white children.

In the future, the researchers plan to examine the links among neighborhood, school and family characteristics, and school achievement and emotional adjustment.

For more information: These findings come from the Child Development Supplement of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, a new nationally representative, longitudinal study of children and families. Conducted at the Survey Research Center, Institute for Social Research, the University of Michigan, this ongoing study is designed to allow researchers to examine the school achievement, social development, and health of all types of children. Web site: www.isr.umich.edu/src/child-development/home.html.

References

Sandra L. Hofferth, "Healthy Environments, Healthy Children: Children in Families" (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1997 Panel Study of Income Dynamics, Child Development Supplement, 1998).

Sandra L. Hofferth and John F. Sandberg, "How American Children Use Their Time," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* (forthcoming in 2001, Vol. 63, no. 2).

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