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Surprisingly, Family Time Has Grown

By **TARA PARKER-POPE**

Stuart Bradford

Working parents perpetually agonize that they don't see enough of their children. But a surprising new study finds that mothers and fathers alike are doing a better job than they think, spending far more time with their families than did parents of earlier generations.

The study, by two economists at the University of California, San Diego, analyzes a dozen surveys of how Americans say they use their time, taken at different periods from 1965 to 2007. It reports that the amount of child care time spent by parents at all income levels — and especially those with a college education — has risen “dramatically” since the mid-1990s. (The findings by the husband-and-wife economist team of Garey Ramey and Valerie A. Ramey appear in a discussion paper presented in March at a Brookings Institution conference in Washington.)

Before 1995, mothers spent an average of about 12 hours a week attending to the needs of their children. By 2007, that number had risen to 21.2 hours a week for college-educated women and 15.9 hours for those with less education.

Although mothers still do most of the parenting, fathers also registered striking gains: to 9.6 hours a week for college-educated men, more than double the pre-1995 rate of 4.5 hours; and to 6.8 hours for other men, up from 3.7, according to an additional analysis by Betsey Stevenson and Dan Sacks, economists at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.

Family researchers say the news should offer relief to guilt-stricken working parents.

“Parents are feeling like they don't have enough time with their children,” said Ellen Galinsky, president of the Families and Work Institute in New York, which conducts research on the work force. “It's a function of people working so hard, and they are worried they're shortchanging their children. I've never found a group of parents who believe they are spending enough time with their kids.”

Although previous studies have shown increases in parenting time starting in the 1990s, the study by the Rameys is important because it links so many time-use surveys and also breaks the data down by age of the child and education level.

The rise in child-centered time is just one of the ways the American family is changing. Couples are typically waiting longer to get married and begin having children. Divorce rates are dropping with each generation.

And notably, children are no longer so widely viewed as essential to a happy marriage. In 1990, 65 percent of Americans said that children were “very important” to a successful marriage, but by 2007, the number of adults who agreed with that statement had dropped to 41

percent, according to a survey by the Pew Research Center.

In fact, the surge in parenting time may say more about modern marriage than about modern child care practices, Dr. Stevenson said. She notes that among college-educated parents, two- to two-and-a-half hours of the increased time takes place when both parents are together. “Everybody gets in the car,” she said, “and mom and dad both cheer on the kid.”

That may reflect a rise in what Dr. Stevenson calls the “hedonic marriage,” in which couples share home and work responsibilities so they can spend more time together.

By contrast, couples from earlier generations typically had “specialized” roles that tended to keep them apart — the husband working at a job to support the family, the wife staying home to raise the children.

“We’re seeing a rise in marriages where we’re picking people we like to do activities with,” Dr. Stevenson said. “So it’s not surprising we’re going to see that some of the activities we want to do together involve our children.”

So where is the extra time coming from? Women, in particular, are spending less time cooking and cleaning their homes, while men are putting in fewer hours at the office. A 2007 report in *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* showed that leisure time among men and women surged four to eight hours a week from 1965 to 2003.

Notably, the data in the Ramey study do not count the hours mothers and fathers spend “around” their children — at the dinner table, for example, or in solitary play. Instead, the survey tracks specific activities in which the parent is directly involved in the child’s care.

“It’s taking them to school, helping with homework, bathing them, playing catch with them in the back yard,” said a co-author of the leisure-time paper, Erik Hurst, an economist at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business. “Those are the activities that have increased over the last 15 to 20 years.”

Dr. Galinsky notes that although working parents typically feel guilty for not spending more time at home, children often have a different reaction. In a landmark study published as “Ask the Children” (Harper, 2000), she asked more than 1,000 children about their “one wish” for their parents. Although parents expected their children would wish for more family time, the children wanted something different.

“Kids were more likely to wish that their parents were less tired and less stressed,” Dr. Galinsky said.