

CSI 27: Are British parents investing less time in their children?

Summary

- Average time spent in overall childcare by parents with young children (aged under five) has increased in the last five decades. Both mothers and fathers have been investing more time in young children in contemporary Britain than in the past. Paternal care in 2015 is equal to the amount of maternal care in the 1960s.
- However, the gap, in terms of number of minutes, between mothers' and fathers' time investment in children has widened.
- There are no significant differences between employed and not-employed mothers time spent in developmental childcare, indicating that employed mothers cut time from other activities to fund developmental care activities, though they do spend less time in physical care activities.
- Single mothers spend as much time in developmental childcare as married mothers but they cannot compensate for the absence of fathers.
- The education-gap in parental time investment in developmentally salient care activities has widened over the period.

Introduction

There have been substantial changes in British families over the last couple of decades: families have become smaller, marriage rates have declined, mothers have entered the labour market in larger numbers, lone parenthood has increased and parenthood postponed. In the face of these substantial changes, how have British parents fared in terms of the time they invest in bringing up children? Are young children receiving less parenting today than they used to? Have British fathers increased their contribution to childcare? In this briefing note we use nationally representative time use surveys conducted in the last five decades to investigate the trends in time investment in young children in the UK. We focus on parents aged between 20 and 55 with at least one child under the age of five.

How has time investment in young children changed over the fifty years?

Figure 1 shows the trends in parental time investment in young children since the 1960s. The vertical axis shows minutes spent in total primary childcare activities on an average day by married/ cohabiting mothers and fathers with at least one child under the age of 5. Total time spent in *primary childcare* refers to the total minutes spent in all forms of childcare activities (e.g. feeding the baby, playing with child, changing nappies etc.) and reported as the main activity.

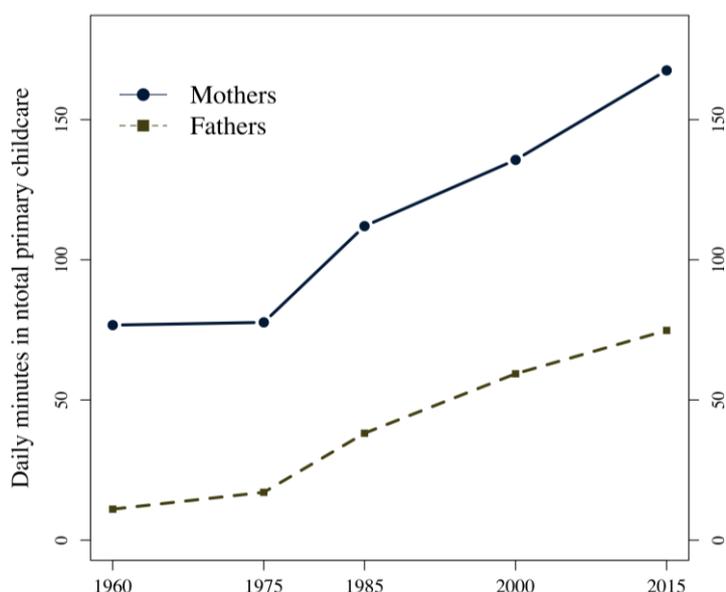


Figure 1: Average minutes spent in total childcare by parents has more than doubled since 1961

Source: British Time Use Survey Series, Centre for Time Use Research (CTUR)

In the 1960s and 70s British mothers spent an average of 77 minutes in primary childcare per day. There has been a steady increase in mothers' time investment in children starting from the 1980s, reaching a maximum of 168 minutes in 2015, over double the starting figure. In the last fifteen years alone, maternal time investment in children has increased a substantial amount, with the average in 2015 around half an hour higher than in 2000. The trend for fathers is very similar to that of mothers. The first two data points showed a modest increase of 6 minutes per day, from 11 minutes in the 1960s to 17 minutes in the 1975. Afterwards, fathers have increased their total time spent in primary care by 15-20 minutes each decade.

Has the gender gap in time investment in children increased over time?

Figure 1 also presents the changing gender gap in parenting. Most noticeably, mothers have always been, and continue to be the main caregivers. The spread of gender egalitarian norms or increased participation of women in the labour market did not lead to a narrowing of the gender gap during the period. On the contrary, the parenting gap between mothers and fathers, in terms of amount dedicated to primary childcare, seems to be widening. In the 1970s the parenting gap between mothers and fathers was one hour, while in 2015 it had increased to about an hour and a half. Paternal care in 2015 is equivalent to the maternal care in the 1960s and 1970s. Fathers are slow to catch up.

Are employed mothers spending less time in childcare than stay-at-home mothers?

Researchers commonly distinguish routine/physical activities (e.g. changing nappies, feeding the baby) from developmental/ interactive care activities (e.g. reading to child, having one-to-one conversation) which seem to be particularly salient for children's cognitive and social skill development¹. Figure 2 presents mothers' time spent in these two specific care activities during weekday and weekends by employment status in 2015. We compare time spent in these two types of activity for mothers who are employed and those who are not.

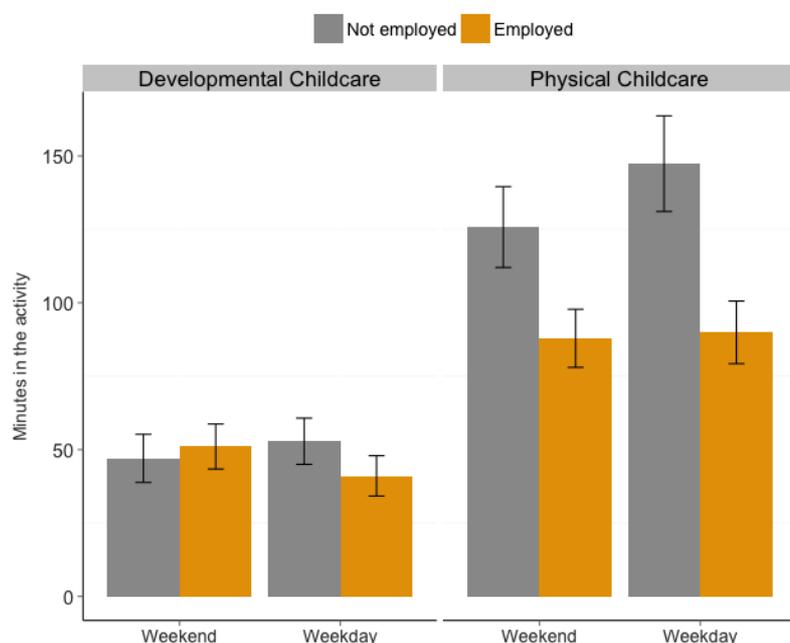


Figure 2: Employed mothers spend less time in physical childcare than not employed mothers, but not in developmental childcare (2015)

Source: 2015 British Time Use Survey, CTUR

The results show no statistically significant difference between employed and not-employed mothers' developmental care time. Employed mothers spend 12 minutes less in developmental childcare than not-employed mothers (53 mins compared to 41) on weekdays and four minutes more on the weekends (46-50). Yet these differences are not statistically significant (in other words these observed differences could be attributed to sampling error). Mothers who are not employed, however, spend significantly and substantially more time in physical care than employed mothers; the difference being almost an hour (146 mins compared to 90) on weekdays and 37 minutes (126-89) on weekends. We can conclude that employed mothers transfer their routine/physical childcare activities to third parties (this could be to paid child minders, fathers, grandparents etc.) while keeping up their developmental care time.

Are children born to dual-earner couples missing out in developmental childcare?

Figure 3 shows the average minutes spent in developmental childcare by family structure and education. Most noticeably, the combination of marital status, employment and educational attainment yield relatively large differences in mothers' developmental care time. Highly educated mothers who are not employed and married to highly educated fathers devote the longest amount of time to developmental care (66 minutes), followed by highly educated employed mothers (55 minutes). At the lower end are the low-educated employed mothers, married to low-educated spouses (42 minutes).

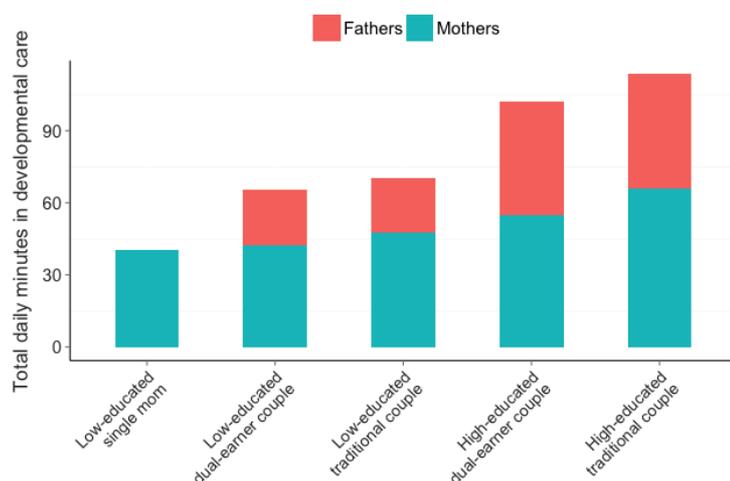


Figure 3: Combined effect of marital status, employment and educational attainment of parents creates a time investment gradient

Source: 2015 UK Time Use Surveys (CTUR)

Notes: Traditional family refers to a household where father is employed and mother is a stay-at-home mom. The figures are for parents with at least one child under the age of 5. Each respondent completed one weekday and one weekend diary. Weekday diaries are multiplied by 5/7 and weekend diaries are multiplied by 2/7 in order to represent an "average weekday".

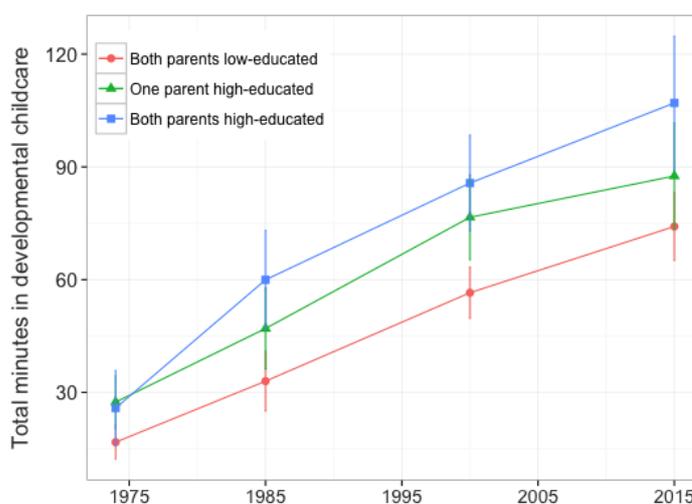
What puts young children at particular disadvantage is the absence of a father. The figure assumes zero time investment from non-residential father in developmental care activity, which is certainly an underestimation. However, research from the US shows that fathers living with their children are far more involved than those who are not². Single mothers, although they spend as much time as married mothers in developmental care cannot compensate for the missing time due to the absence of fathers.

Has the education gap in time investment increased over time?

In his best-selling book, *Our Kids*, Bob Putnam presents a series of "scissors-graph" pointing to a widening opportunity gap facing American children. One of those graphs shows a widening education-gap in parental time investment in developmental care activities. In this final figure we investigate whether trends are in the same direction in the UK.

Figure 4: Children born to two highly educated parents are at an increasing advantage

Source: British Time Use Survey Series, CTUR



The final figure shows minutes spent in developmental childcare by mothers and fathers according to their own and spouse's educational attainment. The results point to a remarkably consistent and positive pattern across all education levels: Total parental time investment in developmentally salient care activities has substantially increased in the last four decades. However, this increase is most pronounced for highly educated parents resulting in a widening education gap in time

investment in children. In the 1970s parents spent about 20-30 minutes on these activities and there was no significant difference by parental educational level. Starting from the 1980s the gap between the highly educated and low-educated couples widened slightly (27, 29 and 33 minutes in each decade, respectively). In the most recent period children with two low-educated parents receive, on average, 74 minutes of developmental childcare, whereas those who are born to highly educated parents receive half an hour more (107 minutes). It should be highlighted that because the sample is limited to married/cohabiting parents, children who are living in single parent households are excluded. As shown previously those are the children who are at particular risk of missing out on parental time investment due to the absence of a residential father. Incorporating these into the picture is likely to lead to an even larger investment gap, pointing out to a significant source of inequality of opportunity.

Technical Details

Time Diary Methodology: In this briefing note we use data from five time use surveys collected in Britain in 1961, 1974-75, 1983-85, 2000-01 and early release of 2014-15. All the surveys applied time diary methodology. Unlike in *stylized questions* where the respondents are required to remember the total amount of time spent on or frequency of an activity, in time diary surveys respondents contemporaneously describe their 24 hours in their own words without being prompted about specific activities. This allows time diary methodology to provide the most reliable and accurate information on time use patterns. Please visit www.timeuse.org for more detailed information about the data.

Sample: With the exception of the 1961 survey, the sample is limited to married/cohabiting men and women between the age of 20 and 55 with at least one child under the age of 5. There was no information on the marital status of respondents in the 1961 survey, so the sample in this survey might have a very small number of single parents. In the 1975 survey, for example, 3% of the parents were single. The last figure is limited to married/ cohabiting respondents where both partners returned diaries. The results are purely descriptive and do not control for factors such as the number of children in the household, ethnic background or household income.

Measurement and Comparability Issues: Total time spent in *primary childcare* refers to the total minutes spent in all forms of childcare activities and reported as the main activity at a specified time on a given diary day. With the exception of the last two surveys, original activity categories were not entirely consistent, the 1975 survey particularly having a very limited number of activity categories. *Developmental childcare* refers to activities that are particularly salient for children's social and cognitive skill development such as reading, playing and homework.

There are also some variations in diary methodology. The surveys in 2000 and 2015 were two-day diaries, where the respondents returned one weekday and one weekend diaries, whereas in the previous surveys respondents returned 7-day diaries. For the 2000 and 2015 surveys the dependent variable is the sum of minutes spent in an activity multiplied by 2/7 on weekends and 5/7 on weekdays.

Educational attainment is measured as the age at which school is completed. In order to address the selection of education we choose different cut-off points for age at which school is completed in each survey period. The cut-off point divides the sample of mothers roughly into two equal halves and fathers by 30-60.

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¹ Kalil, A., Ryan, R., & Corey, M. (2012). Diverging destinies: Maternal education and the developmental gradient in time with children. *Demography*, 49, 1361-1383

Altintas, E. (2015) "Educational Differences in Fathers' Time with Children and Two Parent Families: Time Diary Evidence from the US", *Family Science*. 6(1): 293-301.

² Altintas, E. (2016) "Widening Education-Gap in Developmental Childcare Activities in the US, 1963-2013", *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 78(1): 26-42.

Putnam, R. (2015). *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, Simon & Schuster

³ Full project output can be viewed here <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-childhood-origins-of-social-mobility>

