

**Time With Children: Is More Always Better?**

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## INTRODUCTION

Family environments are expected to differentially impact children and their well-being. Nearly three decades of research has consistently shown that children growing up in single-parent families do less well, on average, than children in two-parent homes. While about half of these differences in outcomes have been attributed to economic resource differentials between one- and two-parent families, that leaves half the variance unexplained by income alone (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Many hypothesize that the remaining effects are explained by differences in parenting, particularly the amount of monitoring and supervision children receive (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Because only one adult is available for monitoring and supervision in single-parent homes, one-parent homes are thought to have lower levels of this, and therefore children growing up in single-parent homes have poor outcomes. Hogan & Kitagawa (1985), for example, argue that it is the lack of monitoring and supervision that explains why adolescents girls growing up in single-parent homes are more likely to experience a teen birth than girls growing up with two-parents. From the field of developmental psychology comes the idea that cohesive relationships with parents—developed in part by spending time in shared, mutually enjoyable activities—serve as a protective factor throughout the course of adolescent development (e.g., Werner, 1992; Garnezy, 1982).

In this manner, we have often used family structure as a proxy for family processes (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983; Bryant & Zick, 1996). Information on children's time use, however, which details the activities that children are engaged in, as well as who they are engaged with, permits us to directly test hypotheses regarding family structure, supervision, companionship, and children's outcomes. In particular, we focus on how much time children spend directly involved with parent(s) or other adult caregivers, such as a grandparent in a single mother family. Theoretical perspectives from sociology, economics, and developmental psychology suggests that time spent with parents is an important factor underlying child well-being and has hypothesized a positive relationship between time and outcomes.

We also examine the relationship between the time children spent with caregivers and their family structure. In particular, we are interested in whether children in single mother families receive less time with caregivers than those in two-parent families, as previously hypothesized. We are also interested in whether the presence of a grandmother in a single mother family provides children with additional caregiving time, making up for any potential losses between single parent and two parent homes.

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES OF CHILDREN'S ACTIVITIES

Economists, sociologists, and psychologists all acknowledge the importance of examining the activities that children are involved in and who they are involved with. Although time use is important for all three disciplines, the theoretical rationale for their importance differs. Using notions of human capital, economists argue that parental investments in children are key to determining their future success. Accumulating skills in childhood is of paramount importance, and therefore understanding what impedes and what enhances the development of competencies that translate into later life success is an important focus. Human capital investment includes all the processes that augment children's cognitive, physical, and behavioral skills (Becker, 1991). Parent-child shared time is critical for building human capital, and the purpose of time that parents and children spend together is the enhancement of human capital.

Broadening the notion of human capital, sociologists view social capital as integral to successful development. Social capital, like human capital, increases children's future

productivity. Key to social capital investments, however, are children's inter-personal relationships. Social interactions with others, particularly adults and especially parents, can provide further social capital to facilitate good child outcomes. Coleman (1998, 1992) in examining the effects of single-parenthood and maternal employment, argued that both conditions undermine the social capital that children have available to them. These conditions result in parents spending less time with their children. Single-parent families are thought to curtail the investments that mothers and fathers are willing or able to invest in monitoring and supervising children (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Children's access to adults in the family, and attention given to children by adults, is seen as crucial in the acquisition of social capital (Coleman, 1998).

Developmental psychologists have devoted substantial efforts to understanding how children and adolescents experiences with family members and friends are linked to their well-being. Most of this work has examined the qualities of social relationships (e.g., amount of conflict; feelings of intimacy). Analyses of children's patterns of companionship are rare (see Montemayor for a notable exception) despite the fact that by a variety of accounts, children's patterns of everyday activities are seen as developmentally significant. A number of writers have suggested, for example, that the diversity and complexity of activity patterns, their motivational elements, and their cognitive and social demands constitute important developmental opportunities (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Larson & Verne, 1999; Rogoff, 1990).

## **FAMILY STRUCTURE AND TIME**

The family environment plays a critical role in child development and living arrangements are central contexts that shape development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and children's living arrangements represent an important contextual factor. A dramatic increase in the number of households headed by women has generated a significant body of research on the relationship between family structure and child outcomes, generally finding that children living in two-parent families fare better on a number of outcomes compared with children in single-parent homes (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). These findings remain even after economic resources are controlled. Many have hypothesized that differences in parenting and supervision account for the remaining gap. Since parents are an important resource for children, two are better than one. Children in two parent families have greater access to parents' time, and that, in part, may explain some of the differences found by family structure. This hypothesis suggests that children in two parent homes fare better because they have two adults available to them. However, it is possible that the presence of a grandmother in a single-parent home can provide access to this second adult, and thereby compensate for the single mother family structure.

Clearly, time spent with children is merely one component of the parenting process. Rather than merely the amount, the quality of time is likely to be central. We view the examination of the amount of time as a first step. Existing research focuses on a more is better model, and in order to understand the impact of time on children's well-being we re-examine this hypothesis and assess its relationship with family structure.

## **DATA**

We use data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) Child Development Supplement (CDS). The PSID has collected annual information on a variety of topics since 1968, including income sources for the prior year, household composition, and family transitions. Individuals are re-interviewed biannually regardless of whether they are living in the

same home or with the same people. Additional families are added to the sample when children leave home or a marriage breaks apart. This produces an unbiased sample of families each year and a representative sample of children that are born to these families. The 1997 wave of the PSID supplemented its core data collection with information on parents and their 0 to 12 year old children. The objective of the CDS was to gather nationally representative information on children and families to examine how economic and social differences effect children's development (Hofferth et al., 1998). The CDS contains reliable age-graded assessments of cognitive, behavioral, and health status of 3,563 children obtained from the mother and second caregiver (i.e., the father in two-parent homes and a grandparent in many single-parent homes), a teacher or child care provider, and the child.

As part of the CDS, a time diary was collected on how the child spends his or her time in a randomly selected weekday and weekend day. All time diary information was collected during the school year and was interviewer-administered. Primary caregiver and their children were asked to relate the time that an activity began and ended, what was taking place, where the child was at the time, and who was doing the activity with the child. This information allows us to determine how much time the parent and other caregivers spend directly interacting with the child, measured as minutes per day. When examining the amount of time children spend with mothers and other caregivers, we focus on weekday days only.

In order to examine whether the time spent with children is related to various measures of well-being, we begin with the Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery (WJ-R), which measures several dimensions of intellectual ability.

Our analysis was restricted to African American and White children. The small sample sizes for other racial and ethnic groups precluded their inclusion as separate groups. Theoretically, there is no rationale for lumping all other groups into one category, and we therefore chose to exclude them. Our analyses were also limited to children living with both biological parents, those living with a single mother only, and those living with a single mother and grandmother. Our final sample included 1,974 children, of whom 78 percent were living in two-parent families, 19 percent were in single parent families and 3 percent were living with single mothers and their grandmothers. The living arrangements in single-parent homes vary by age. Young children are more likely to live with a grandmother than are older children (See Table 1). When examining the influence of living with a grandmother, this is more relevant for younger children (ages 0 to 6) than for older children (ages 7 to 12).

Table 2 examines the amount of time children spend directly interacting with their mother by family structure. Children in two parent families spend the most time with their mother, followed by those in single parent only homes. Children living with their single mother and grandmother (because of the small sample size for older aged children, we focus here on children 6 and under) have the least time spent with their mother. Table 3 expands the time spent with children to include other caregivers (in two parent homes, this includes the mother and father, in single mother only homes it is limited to the single mother, and in single mother and grandmother homes it includes the single mother and the grandmother). Children in two-parent families still fare best in terms of direct time spent with a caregiver. For young children in single parent families, those living with a single mother and grandmother have more direct time with a caregiver than do children living only with their single mothers. These bivariate results indicate that the presence of a second adult can make up for some, although not all, of the loss in living with a single mother.

## RESULTS

We begin by examining the relationship between family structure and the mean amount of time (time in minutes/day) spent with the caregivers by family structure (the same measure examined in Table 3). These results are presented in Table 4. Focusing first on children ages 3 to 5, we see that, controlling for other factors, children living in single parent homes spend less time with a caregiver than do children in two parent families. Children in single mother families spend about 76 minutes less with a caregiver, and those in single mother and grandmother families receive about 130 minutes less time with a caregiver. Rather than the presence of a grandmother making up for the time loss in single mother homes, it appears that these children actually receive less time than those living with only their single mother. Child's age, the number of children, and a working mother are all associated with significant reductions in time with caregivers. Children who are living in households with incomes below the official poverty line experience more time with caregivers than do children in more economically stable households.

We further investigate the relationship between family structure and time by focusing on children living in single parent homes (Table 5). This model includes only children in single parent families and compares the experiences of those living with a single mother only to those that live with their single mother and grandmother. Confirming the results seen earlier, children who live with their grandmother spend less time with caregivers than children who live only with their single mother. Rather than the grandmother's presence adding a second adult that can make up for the lost time with a father, children in these families actually fare worse in terms of time with caregivers. It is likely that this finding is explained by selection factors associated with single-mother grandmother coresidence situations. These families may be particularly disadvantaged, and coresidence is serving as a proxy for these circumstances.

Overwhelmingly, resources such as time and money are viewed as beneficial for children, and the relationship is often presented as linear. Therefore, the hypothesis has been, especially in economics and sociology, that more is always better. However, developmental theory argues that the amount of time parents spend directly interacting with their children should be developmentally appropriate—a 5 year old should receive less supervision and direct time than a 12 year old. As children age, more time with parents may take away from enriching opportunities that can contribute to their well-being. Participation in extra-curricula activities, civic engagement, and positive peer interactions may be limited by extensive caretaker contact. Therefore, more time may not always be better for children.

We will examine the impact of direct time with caregivers on a variety of outcomes so examine the extent to which more is always better. As a start, we focus on a cognitive measure by examining children's letter word scores (See Table 6). As found in most previous research, single parent family structure is associated with lower scores. When we examine the relationship between time spent directly with caregivers and children's scores, we find a significant positive relationship for young children (ages 3 to 5) and a significant negative relationship for older children (ages 6 to 12). Separate analyses conducted on each family structure (analyses not shown) finds a similar relationship.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our initial examination reveals two important findings. First, the presence of a second adult in a single parent home, in this case the child's grandmother, does not compensate for the loss of a father in terms of the amount of time that children spend with a caregiver. Children in

single mother and grandmother families spend less time with a caregiver than those who live with only their mother. Further investigation into the characteristics of single mother and grandmother, as compared with single mother only families, is needed to better understand the selection into this family structure and how it may influence family dynamics, including time spend with children. Our results indicate that more time is not always a good thing. Although younger children benefit, as reflected in their letter-word scores, from more time with a caregiver, for older children more time doesn't translate as easily to better outcomes. The addition of adult outcomes measures tapping different domains, our next step, will assist in further elaborating this relationship.

**TABLE 1. Family Structure**

	3-5		6-12		All (including 0-2)	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Both biological parents	342	73.23	788	76.09	1,527	77.90
Single mom family	155	21.13	359	22.35	621	18.94
Grandparent	43	5.64	31	1.56	145	3.16
	540	100	1178	100	2293	

**TABLE 2. Family Structure and the Average Time Spent with Mother (Time in minutes/day)**

	Mean time spent with mother (3-12)	3-5	6-12
Two-parent biological family	153.3833	216.3	127.5833
Single-parent family	146.2667	236.45	109.95
Single-parent/Grandparent family	91.4	123.85	41.43333

**TABLE 3. Family Structure and the Average Time Spent with Caregivers (Time in minutes/day)**

	Mean time (3-12)	3-5	6-12
Time spent directly with mother and father in a 2-parent biological family	237.08	317.2333	204.3
Time spent directly with mother in a single-parent family	146.2667	236.45	109.95
Time spent directly with mother and grandparent in a single-parent/Grandparent family	188.4167	209.0167	122.9

**Table 4: Correlates of Time with Caregivers**

	Ages 3 to 5		Ages 6 to 12	
	b	s.e.	b	s.e.
Family structure				
Single mother only	-76.49	8.13	-77.80	3.57
Single mother and grandmother	-129.89	12.28	-28.50	9.85
African American	-19.49	8.05	-28.53	3.68
Child's sex (male)	3.16	5.17	-17.32	2.45
Child's age	-55.05	3.35	-6.23	0.62
Number of children in family	-47.03	2.55	-20.50	1.30
Mothers work status	-22.13	5.50	-39.51	2.77
Poverty	48.02	8.73	24.93	4.36

**Table 5: Correlates of Time with Caregivers in Single Mother Families**

	Ages 3 to 5	
	b	s.e.
Single mother with grandmother	-58.78	12.20
African American	33.11	10.68
Child's sex (male)	-2.87	9.72
Child's age	-55.55	6.24
Number of children in family	-61.75	5.00
Mothers work status	-43.67	11.03
Poverty	89.46	10.76
Welfare	-26.26	11.61

**Table 6: Time with Caregivers and Children's Standardized Letter Word Scores**

	Ages 3 to 5		Ages 6 to 12	
	b	s.e.	b	s.e.
Family structure				
Single mother only	-3.09	0.60	-1.66	0.48
Single mother and grandmother	-2.35	0.92	-1.74	0.51
African American	-1.92	0.58	-6.72	0.45
Child's sex (male)	-0.25	0.35	-2.54	0.29
Child's age	1.45	0.24	0.40	0.07
Number of children in family	-1.12	0.17	-2.93	0.16
Mothers work status	-6.10	0.37	-0.16	0.33
Poverty	-1.82	0.63	-0.96	0.57
Home Scale	1.17	0.09	1.14	0.07
In school	2.79	0.39		
Mother's education				
High school graduate/GED	0.54	0.72	3.57	0.57
More than high school	4.23	0.70	10.89	0.58
Time with caregivers	0.90	0.0	-0.45	0.0