

Children mean stress for mums, joy for dads

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Credit: George Hodan/public domain

A new study from a Cornell University sociologist shows that while parents enjoy the time they spend with their children, parenting carries more strain for mothers.

That is likely, the researchers found, because moms spend more time with their [kids](#) while doing more onerous chores like basic childcare, cooking and cleaning, whereas dads spend more time with children in enjoyable, low-stress activities like play and leisure. Mothers also do

more solo parenting, experience more [sleep disruptions](#) and have less [leisure time](#), which are all associated with lower levels of well-being.

"It's not that moms are so stressed out with their kids, but relative to [fathers](#), they're experiencing more strain," said Kelly Musick, associate professor of policy analysis and management at Cornell and co-author of the study, "How Parents Fare: Mothers' and Fathers' Subjective Well-Being in Time with Children," which appeared in the *American Sociological Review*.

"Mothers are doing different things with their children than fathers are, things that we know aren't as enjoyable," Musick said. "Playing with their kids is a particularly enjoyable experience for [parents](#). And dads are doing more play as a share of the total amount of time they spend with their kids."

And much of the time that fathers spend with children is family time, when the mother is also present, Musick said, so, men don't have sole responsibility for the children as often as [mothers](#).

She pointed to a soccer analogy from late sociologist Suzanne Bianchi, who compared mothers to "sweepers" in soccer; they do what they must to defend the goal.

"They're going to play when they have time to play, but they're going to make sure they have everything else covered," she said. "Dinner is made, the kids are bathed, laundry is folded. They do play with their kids, but when you take account of all the things they're doing, it's just a smaller share of their time."

The researchers mined a new source of data and took a novel approach to get these results.

Analyzing time-use diaries from the American Time Use Surveys from 2010, 2012 and 2013, the researchers looked at reports from 12,000 parents about how they felt and what they were doing during three random periods during a 24-hour day. For each period, the parents rated how happy, sad, stressed and tired they felt and how meaningful they considered the activity they were doing. The researchers then compared how the parents felt doing activities with their [children](#) to how they felt doing the same kinds of activities without their kids.

"A lot of how parents feel about parenting is based on incidental moments with kids," she said, "like hanging out on the couch or going grocery shopping. There's a lot of parenting involved in those small moments."

Musick hypothesizes that perhaps mothers do more of the onerous parenting work because the expectations are higher for them than for fathers. Differences in society's parenting standards for moms and dads in turn make it difficult for mothers to demand less of themselves as parents.

"As a sociologist, I wish we, as a society, could let go of some of the assumptions and constraints we place on the mother and father roles. The mom and the dad are interacting within a societal framework that is out of their control to a great extent," she said. "Couples can try work together to change how they parent, but that's not really the solution. The solution is that we collectively rethink what we expect of fathers and what we expect of mothers."

More information: K. Musick et al, How Parents Fare: Mothers and Fathers Subjective Well-Being in Time with Children, *American Sociological Review* (2016). [DOI: 10.1177/00031224166663917](https://doi.org/10.1177/00031224166663917)

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