

Context may explain why dads are happier and less stressed than moms

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Dads are often happier, less stressed and less tired than moms when taking care of kids, and researchers say these differences may come down to how and when childcare activities are split between parents.

In a study led by Penn State, researchers looked at [childcare](#) through the lens of a "care context." Going beyond measuring how much time mothers and fathers spend taking care of their children, the researchers also looked at the type of childcare activity, when and where it took place, who was present, and how much care was involved.

Cadhla McDonnell, a [doctoral candidate](#) in sociology and demography at Penn State, said the results suggest that while fathers in general are much more involved in their children's lives now than in the past, parenting is still highly gendered.

"There are many types of activities that can be considered childcare, but some are more strenuous or less enjoyable than others," McDonnell said. "A family trip to the playground is going to affect someone differently than changing diapers in the middle of the night, for example. In our study, we tried to capture those variations and see if they're related to the differences we see between mothers' and fathers' moods."

According to the researchers, previous work has shown that mothers tend to be more tired, stressed and unhappy than fathers during caregiving. But sociodemographic characteristics alone could not explain some of these differences. The researchers were curious about whether taking a closer look at how childcare activities were divided between parents could help explain discrepancies between parents' moods.

The researchers used data from the American Time Use Survey collected by the U.S. Census Bureau. Data included information about 4,486 childcare activities, as well as who performed the activity and that person's corresponding mood.

Additionally, the researchers analyzed each activity through the care context, which included five dimensions. The first was "activity type," and included physical ([basic needs](#) like eating and sleeping), recreational

(like play and sports), educational (helping with homework or meeting with teachers), and managerial (planning doctor visits or transporting children).

The remaining dimensions included when and where the activity took place, who was present during the activity, and how much time the activity took.

The researchers found that fathers' childcare activities were more likely to be recreational and take place on the weekend, while mothers' activities were more likely to involve an infant and fit into the category of "solo parenting," that is, parenting without a partner present.

Also, the researchers found that taking the context of childcare activities into account fully explained differences in mother and father happiness, and partially explained differences in stress. It did not explain differences in tiredness.

McDonnell said the study—recently published in the *Journal of Family Issues*—suggests that moms are generally more tired and stressed than dads, and that they also are doing more childcare activities that tend to produce more stress and less happiness. But it is still not clear why these differences exist.

"Our findings show that some aspects of parenting are more enjoyable than others and that the way childcare is distributed between mothers and fathers right now brings more emotional rewards for dads than for moms," McDonnell said. "But it's impossible to say from our data whether this is the result of personal choices or whether it's a reaction to outside forces like job demands."

Additionally, the researchers found that despite their differences, one thing that remained consistent between mothers and fathers was how

meaningful they found childcare.

"Traditionally caregiving has been seen as more central to women's identities than it is to men's, and that would suggest that mothers might find caring for their children more meaningful than fathers do," McDonnell said. "But that's not the case—mothers and [fathers](#) both found caring for children highly meaningful and there is no difference by gender."

McDonnell said that in the future, additional research could focus on how gendered caregiving may have additional impacts on parents' well being.

"We know from other research that parents tend to have lower life satisfaction than non-parents, and this is especially true for women," McDonnell said. "An interesting question could be how that's related to gendered caregiving. Why do [mothers](#) seem to take on childcare in contexts that are less emotionally rewarding? For couples, how can they share caregiving in a way that is equally rewarding for both partners? These are all important questions."

More information: Cadhla McDonnell et al, Happy Moms, Happier Dads: Gendered Caregiving and Parents' Affect, *Journal of Family Issues* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0192513X19860179](https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X19860179)

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