

# Being there: The time dual-earner couples spend with their children

by Cynthia Silver

In the majority of Canadian families with children, both parents now work outside the home and an increasing number of them have full-time paid employment. This phenomenon is not likely to change: over three-quarters of parents employed full-time with children under 15 agree that “both the man and the woman should contribute to the household income.” The new attitude to sharing financial responsibility for the family has been accompanied by an overwhelming opinion that raising the children is also a shared responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

This article uses the 1998 General Social Survey to examine the time parents spend with their children in families where both mother and father are employed full-time, with particular emphasis on the father’s time. “Time with children” encompasses both time devoted explicitly to childcare and time spent in the child’s presence. The analysis is restricted to intact families — those in which the children are the natural children of both parents — to avoid any possible

effect of stepparenting on differences between women’s and men’s time with children.

## **Fewer full-time employed parents among those with young children**

About two-thirds of full-time employed parents with children were dissatisfied with the balance between their job and home life. Fathers and mothers alike blamed their dissatisfaction on not having enough time for family, but many also complained of spending too much time on the job.

Families can theoretically make more time available to young children by working fewer hours for pay. In fact, this is what many Canadian mothers do. In families with young children where mothers are employed full-time outside the home, they report fewer hours of paid work on average than either their spouses or women with older children.

Working fewer hours for pay allows mothers to devote much more time than fathers to their small children. Mothers employed full-time and with a child under 5 spent almost six and

one-half hours each day with their child, and fathers over two hours less.<sup>2</sup> The gap narrows for parents of older children. Mothers with a child aged 5 to 8 were with their children about 1.5 hours more than fathers, and 50 minutes more if the child was aged 9 to 12. When children reach age 13 to 14, the time gap between parents has closed, mainly because the mother’s time has fallen substantially. Both mothers and fathers spent about 2 hours and 40 minutes a day with young teens.

Of course, both parents are often with their children at the same time, usually because they are engaged in the same activities. For about half the time that fathers spent with their kids, the mothers were also present. Mothers were less likely to be with their husbands when they had

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1. Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1995.

2. These estimates of hours per day are averaged over a seven-day week. Parents tend to spend more time with their children on weekends than on weekdays.

younger children with them; 40% of mothers' time with pre-schoolers was spent in their husband's company, compared with 63% of their time with young teens. Fewer average hours of employment among mothers with very young children may underlie this difference.

### What are parents and children doing together?

Time with their children does not necessarily mean that the child is the central focus of the parents' activity. A parent may be accompanied by a child while grocery shopping or shoveling the driveway. And in fact, dual-earner couples employed full-time were very often doing some form of household work when they were with their children. This household work certainly encompassed childcare but it also included activities like shopping, cleaning and household maintenance.

For example, fathers of pre-schoolers engaged in 2.2 hours per day of household work while they were with their children, of which only 1.5 hours was solely dedicated to childcare. The figures for mothers were 3.7 hours and 2.5 hours per day, respectively. The time on household activities while with the children dropped steadily for parents of older children, partly because less childcare was necessary and partly because a parent was less likely to be with an older child while doing other kinds of household work.

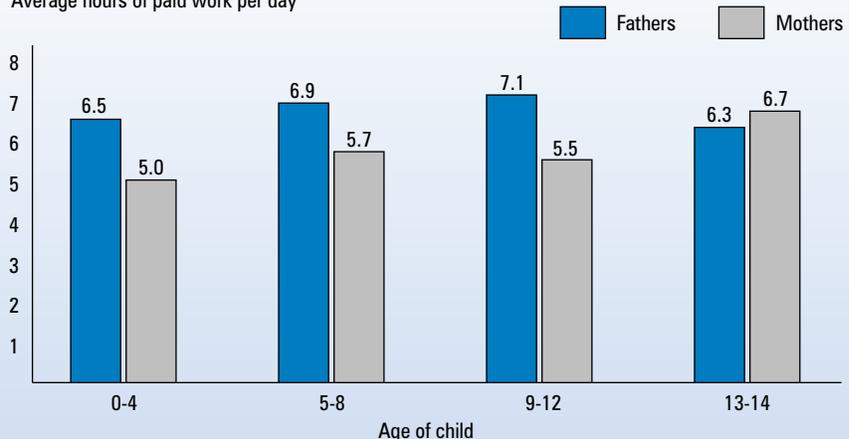
### Nature of childcare shifts as child gets older

Taking care of children under age 5 can be very intensive because it is characterized by personal care (such as feeding, washing, dressing, medical care) and also by playing. Personal care is the more time-consuming activity for both parents: mothers devoted 91 minutes and fathers 47 minutes to these tasks.<sup>3</sup> On the other



## Fathers of young children reported more hours of paid work than mothers

Average hours of paid work per day

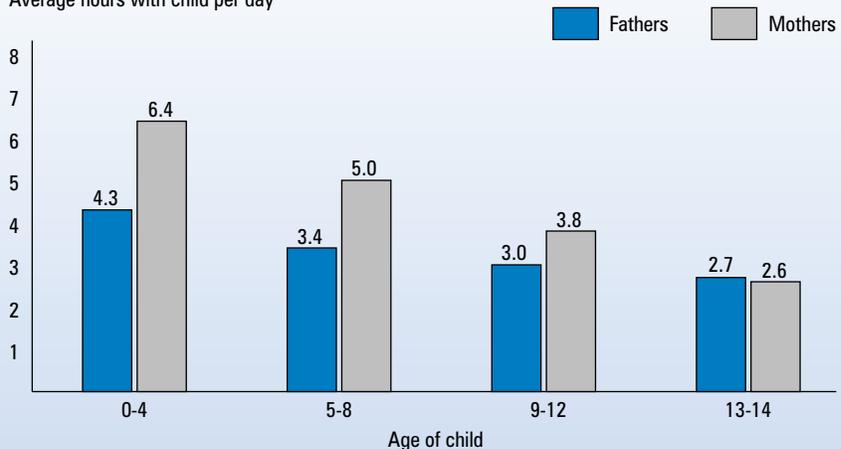


Note: Both parents are employed full time.  
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1998.



## The gap in time spent by mothers and fathers with their children narrows as the child grows older

Average hours with child per day



Note: Both parents are employed full time.  
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1998.

hand, both parents each spent about 30 minutes per day playing with their preschool children.

When children are between age 5 and 8, childcare time with them drops to about an hour for fathers and one and one-half hours for mothers. At this age, other forms of childcare emerge: helping and teaching, reading and talking, and travel. This

leaves fathers spending 18 minutes providing personal care to their children, and mothers 48 minutes on average.

3. Note that this is the time parents spent "in person," that is, in the child's presence. Parents actually dedicated more time to many childcare functions because some of these events take place when the child is not there.

With children aged 9 to 12, fathers spent 34 minutes per day providing childcare and mothers 54 minutes. Fathers dedicated only about 10 of these minutes to personal care, while mothers spent 19. As one would expect, less childcare time was reported for children in their early teens, and even then the most prevalent childcare activity was chauffeuring them to various places.<sup>4</sup>

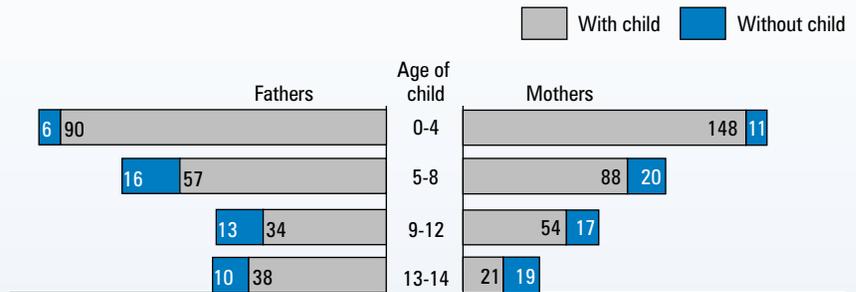
**Mealtime brings the family together**

After childcare, having meals together is the most common activity shared by parents and their children. Dual-earner couples spent about an hour a day sharing meals with their preschoolers — fathers averaged 50 minutes and mothers an hour and 15 minutes — either eating at home, in restaurants, or socializing over a meal with friends or family. This average dropped for older children, to less than 40 minutes for parents of teens. Younger children were often close by when meals were being prepared or cleaned up, mainly with their mother, while teens were less likely to be around when these tasks were being done.

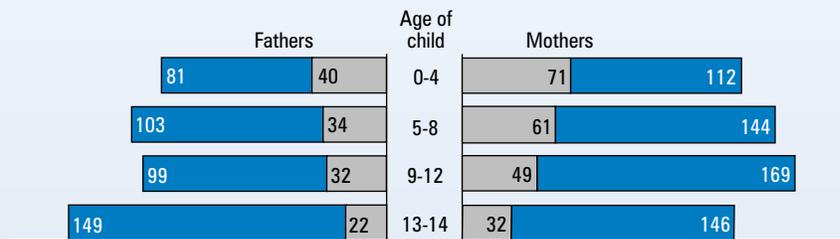
**Fathers generally spend less of their leisure time with their children**

When parents employed full time reported their leisure time — including such things as reading, watching television, socializing,<sup>5</sup> participating in sports, doing hobbies, or playing games — it was apparent that mothers had less leisure time than fathers. They also devoted a larger proportion of that time to their children. For

Average minutes per day spent by parents on childcare



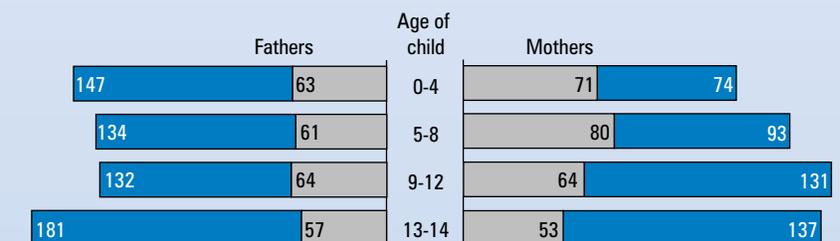
... on other household work and shopping



...at mealtime<sup>1</sup>



... on leisure time<sup>2</sup>



4. See Clark, Warren. "Traffic report: Week-day commuting patterns," *Canadian Social Trends*, Spring 2000.

5. Excludes eating in restaurants and socializing over meals in private homes.

1. Meal time includes restaurant meals and socializing with meals in homes.  
 2. Leisure time excludes restaurant meals and socializing with meals in homes.  
 Note: Both parents are employed full time.  
 Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1998.

This article is based on data from the 1998 General Social Survey on time use. The survey interviewed almost 11,000 Canadians aged 15 and over in the 10 provinces; it provides information about how people spent their time and who was with them during one day's activities. This information allows examination of how parents spent time with their children. To keep this article brief, the study population is restricted to families in which both parents worked full-time for pay (that is, 30 hours or more per week), and in which the children are the biological offspring of both husband and wife. Both married and common-law partners are included among the dual-earner couples studied here.

The "time with children" concept used in this study is broader than the time dedicated explicitly to childcare. For example, a respondent may be preparing a meal while their child is snacking in the kitchen. In this survey, any children under 15 present in the same room were reported as spending time with the respondent, even if they were not participating in the same activity. By focussing on all time spent in the presence of one's own children, this article avoids parents' subjective assessments about what constitutes "childcare" time and who is minding the kids.

**Average time spent with children in a given age group:** the total sum of minutes when one or more children in a given age range was with the parent, divided by the number of parents who have a child that age. The average time estimates should not be interpreted as the amount of time a parent spends with a single child; this is because parents may have more than one child in the same age group, or may have children in other age groups such that some activities may be due to the presence of these other children. Although it does not isolate time devoted exclusively to one child, this approach does allow for an examination of the effect of a child's age on parental time use.

**Childcare:** The childcare time described in this study is restricted to the primary activity reported by a parent. The four basic categories of childcare activities are: personal and medical care; playing; helping, teaching; reading and talking; and travel for the child. For example, bathing or dressing a small child, reading to an older child, or driving a child to dance lessons would constitute childcare. In addition, a parent may be providing care for a child while the child is not present, for example, going to pick them up at the babysitter's or checking over their homework.

example, fathers of preschoolers recorded over an hour more leisure per day (3.5 hours) than mothers (2.4 hours). And although fathers spent almost as much leisure time with their preschoolers (1.0 hours) as did mothers (1.2 hours), it amounted to less than one-third of their available leisure time compared with almost half of mothers'. A similar gap was

observed among parents of children aged 5 to 8. The gender gap was small for parents with older children.

### Summary

While gender roles have some impact on how dual-earner couples with full-time employment spend time with their children, the child's age appears to have the largest impact on how a

parent's time is allocated. Both parents spent more time with younger children than with older children, although it is true that fathers were with them for less time than mothers. Much, but not all, of this difference is related to fathers' longer hours of paid work. As the children grow older, parents devote less time to them and more to paid work.

Indeed, gender differences appear to be transitory among parents working full time, disappearing as the children get older. The differences in time spent with young children appear symptomatic of the degree to which mothers in dual-earner couples have retained the primary responsibility for keeping house, recording about one hour per day more than fathers on household work other than childcare. Nonetheless, the amount of time fathers spend with their children reveals a high level of paternal involvement in family life that should not be overlooked.



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