

# Do you spend enough time with your kids? The better question is, do you have fun doing it? <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

Parents have a lot to worry about when it comes to figuring out what it takes to raise happy, healthy, successful children. Is it a strict diet of only organic food? Carefully monitored limits on sugar? Never letting them play unattended? On top of these worries is a pressure on women to live up to a cultural ideal of motherhood that is as impossible as it is unfair.

How can any of us simply enjoy raising kids when the stakes are so high and when we're bound to screw up if we're not constantly vigilant? The fact that no one really knows how to do it right only makes us all that much more anxious.

Fretting over how much time to spend with our kids is one more symptom of our current parenting culture, as a new study makes clear. It calls to mind images of factory workers lined up to punch time cards. Is that what parenting has become? We've gone from having the time of our lives to stressing over the life of our time.

Now that we have even more reason to believe that quality trumps quantity, thanks to a new study, perhaps parents can relax, even if it is just a little bit, and free ourselves from the cultural pressures that have turned parenting into a joyless, anxiety-laden job.

If responsible parenting has begun to feel like punching a clock, good news. You don't actually have to spend time with your children to improve their chances of future success, according to what is being billed as the first large-scale longitudinal study of parent time, published in the April issue of the *Journal of Marriage and Family*.

In looking at children ages three to 11, researchers found that the amount of time parents spent with them had virtually no impact on their academic achievement, emotional well-being and behaviour.

"I could literally show you 20 charts, and 19 of them would show no relationship between the amount of parents' time and children's outcomes...Nada. Zippo," Melissa Milkie, a sociologist at the University of Toronto who co-authored the study, told the *Washington Post*.

While quantity appears to mean zip, quality time, such as reading with kids or having dinner with them, was linked to beneficial outcomes.

"In an ideal world, this study would alleviate parents' guilt about the amount of time they spend and show instead what's really important for kids," Milkie said.

How much quality time is necessary to ensure positive outcomes? Unfortunately, the study doesn't say.

The goal of the study, of course, wasn't to provide any such magic number.

Instead, given that parents now spend more time with kids than a generation ago, researchers set out to discover what impact it might be having, if any.

(Researchers were primarily interested in children's time with their mothers, which, unfortunately, means largely ignoring what effect time with fathers might have on a child's life. That question would have been especially interesting to answer given how much we are learning about the impact of engaged fathers.)

And yes, as you may be surprised to learn, parents are spending more time with their kids. In 1965, fathers spent 2.6 hours a week with kids. By 2010, that number had jumped to 7.2 hours. Over the same time period, mothers' time climbed from 10.5 hours a week to 13.7 hours.

This study will hopefully help relieve parents who feel guilty they aren't spending enough time with their children. But more than anything, it should be a reminder that what's really important is quality time - described in the study as reading with your kids or sharing a meal with them.

In other words, the moments where you actually connect with your children. Not those moments where you're checking e-mails on a

smartphone while only vaguely aware of your children over by the couch drawing something.

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**Region:** Canada <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** parent involvement <sup>[4]</sup>

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