

How Rewarding is Active Parenting?

NOV 28, 2022 BY GIULIA M. DOTTI SANI

SHARE

The internet is packed with advice for new parents on how to raise happy children. The bottom line of most of that advice is always the same: spend time with your children. This can mean multiple things: for infants, think breastfeeding or co-sleeping, giving a bath and settling to sleep. For older children, examples go from reading stories, singing songs, and going on family outings, to helping with homework and chaperoning kids to places. Whatever the activity, studies show that children benefit from spending time with their parents, emotionally, cognitively, and physically.

But What About the Parents?

How much do they benefit from childcare time, if at all?
Everyone knows that raising children is no walk in the park. We



have all witnessed scenes of desperate parents dragging their screaming toddler through a department store; we have all seen (and sometimes judged) bored parents at the playground scrolling their phones in search of entertainment while pushing their child on the swing for the millionth time. Not to mention the physical, organizational, and financial burdens that parents carry—the countless nights of poor sleep while juggling a precarious balance between work and family, and making sure the present and future economic needs of the family are met.

Sounds like a nightmare? And yet, a commonly accepted idea in society is that children are a "blessing" and that parenthood is the most fulfilling experience a human being can have, often identified as a source of meaning and purpose in life.

So, Are Children Good or Bad for You?

Previous studies comparing levels of well-being between parents and childless people have had **mixed results**: some studies suggest a positive relationship between happiness and parenthood, while others indicate the opposite. Instead, I wanted to know how parents feel while they are *with their children*. If parenting is found to be an overall pleasurable activity, then it is possible that parents who spend more time with their kids will be happier than those who do not.

To answer this question, I looked at time-use data from Italy collected by the **Italian National Institute of Statistics**. To collect time-use data, a sample of individuals (in my case, Italian parents with at least one child younger than ten years old) are given a daily or weekly diary. They are asked to write their activities during the interview day (or week)—sleeping, eating, working, doing housework, childcare, etc.—and how much time they spend on each activity.

In this survey, parents were also asked how much they enjoyed the activity they were engaged in and how satisfied they were with their life overall. This allowed me to (1) test if parents enjoyed childcare more or less than other activities, and (2) link childcare time with overall life satisfaction. The time diaries included background information such as age, gender, marital status, employment, and education, which I also linked to childcare time and well-being. In particular, I was interested in seeing if parents' working hours played a role in the relationship between childcare and well-being.

My results show, first, that childcare is among the activities that Italian parents enjoy the most, although they prefer the "interactive" kind (playing with and reading to children) compared to the "physical" kind (feeding and bathing). Of all activities, interactive childcare is the one parents enjoy the most, even more than other non-child-centered leisurely and fun activities.

Second, parents who spend a lot of time on childcare are, on average, more satisfied with life than parents who spend less time on this activity, but this result does not apply to all parents. Full-time employed fathers are the ones who reap the greatest benefits from spending time with their children (especially the physical kind), while full-time employed mothers have higher life satisfaction when they spend more time on interactive care. Crucially, increased childcare does not lead to greater life satisfaction among mothers working part-time or not working at all.

Thus, the finding that childcare time is positively related with life satisfaction *seems* like a win-win situation from which both parents and children benefit. Yet, I find the inequality in life satisfaction at the intersection of gender and employment

troubling. If part-time and non-employed mothers do not reap much benefit from childcare when their lives are, by definition, more centered on the domestic sphere, they might be hindered in their pursuit of happiness, self-fulfillment, and well-being.

Considering this result, perhaps we should question the long-term sustainability of the ever-increasing childcare load dictated by contemporary parenthood cultures and start looking for that "sweet spot" where the needs of both children and all parents—regardless of gender and employment status—are successfully met.

For Further Reading

Dotti Sani, G. M. (2021). The intrinsic value of childcare: Positive returns of childcare time on parents' well-being and life satisfaction in Italy. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 23, 1901–1921. DOI:10.1007/s10902-021-00477-z.

Connelly, R., & Kimmel, J. (2015). If you're happy and you know it: How do mothers and fathers in the US really feel about caring for their children? *Feminist Economics*, 21(1), 1–34.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2014.970210>

Kalil, A., & Mayer, S. E. (2016). Understanding the importance of parental time with children: Comment on Milkie, Nomaguchi, and Denny (2015). *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 78(1), 262.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12261>

Mikucka, M., & Rizzi, E. (2019). The parenthood and happiness link: Testing predictions from five theories. *European Journal of Population*, 36(2), 337–361, doi: 10.1007/s10680-019-09532-1

Giulia Dotti Sani is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Milano. She studies gender inequalities in paid and unpaid work and public opinion from a comparative perspective.

TAGS:**Character & Context Blog****Mental
Health/Well-
Being****Parenting****Gender****Children****RELATED****NEWS****SEE ALL NEWS**