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FAMILY LIFE

Yes, Your Time as a Parent Does Make a Difference

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Justin Wolfers

The latest salvo in the mommy wars is that all that time you spend parenting just doesn't matter. But it's a claim that, despite the enthusiastic and widespread coverage by news media outlets that include *The Washington Post*, *Vox*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Globe and Mail*, *NBC News*, *The Chicago Tribune* and *The New York Times's Motherlode*, does not hold water.

The claim that parenting time doesn't matter is the bottom line of a single recent study by a team of sociologists who suggest that child outcomes are barely correlated with the time that parents spend with their children. It's essentially a nonfinding, in that they failed to find correlations that could be reliably discerned from chance.

This nonfinding largely reflects the failure of the authors to accurately

measure parental input. In particular, the study does not measure how much time parents typically spend with their children. Instead, it measures how much time each parent spends with children on only two particular days — one a weekday and the other a weekend day.

The result is that whether you are categorized as an intensive or a distant parent depends largely on which days of the week you happened to be surveyed. For instance, I began this week by taking a couple of days off to travel with the children to Disneyworld. A survey asking about Sunday or Monday would categorize me as a very intense parent who spent every waking moment engaged with my children. But today, I'm back at work and am unlikely to see them until late. And so a survey asking instead about today would categorize me as an absentee parent. The reality is that neither is accurate.

It is no surprise that a measure that does such a poor job in capturing my parenting input would be barely related to my children's outcomes.

Trying to get a sense of the time you spend parenting from a single day's diary is a bit like trying to measure your income from a single day. If yesterday was payday, you look rich, but if it's not, you would be reported as dead broke. You get a clearer picture only by looking at your income — or your parenting time — over a more meaningful period.

As Ariel Kalil, a developmental psychologist and professor of public policy at the University of Chicago, told me, "What you did yesterday should not be taken as representative of what you did last year." This is why most high-quality studies of parenting time focus instead on how often parents read to their children, play with them or help them with homework over a period of a month or longer — long enough to represent their different approaches to parenting.

As an exhausted parent who doesn't get enough time to work out, who hasn't seen a grown-up movie for months, and who wishes that date night were an actual night rather than an idea, I understand why so many of us might seize on studies suggesting that we should take more time for ourselves. Perhaps we should. But we should do so without relying on misleading

research. Far better that we make our parenting choices informed by the broader set of more reliable studies, which Ms. Kalil summarized for me as suggesting “that when parents spend high-quality time with their children, their children are more likely to succeed.”

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