

OVERSCHEDULED KIDS, UNDERCONNECTED FAMILIES: THE RESEARCH EVIDENCE

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Changes in Children's and Families' Time

1. A major decline in the free time of children ages 3-12 between 1981 and 1997.

(Findings from national time diary surveys conducted in 1981 and 1997 by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.¹ All findings reported below are from this study unless otherwise footnoted.)

- Free time: 12 hours per week decline in overall free time for children
- Play time: Decreased by three hours per week (a 25% drop from about 16 hours to about 13 hours for the whole group—less than 9 hours per week for older children).
- Unstructured outdoor activities: Fell by 50% (includes activities such as walking, hiking or camping)

2. Decline in family and religious participation time

- Household conversations: dropped by 100%, which means that in 1997 the average American family spent no time per week when talking as a family was the primary activity. (The 1981 baseline was not high, however.) Overall, children in 1997 averaged about 45 minutes per week in conversation with anyone in the family, when the conversation was the primary activity.
- Family meal time: declined by about 10 percent from 1981-1997, from about 9 hours per week to about 8 hours per week.
- Family dinners: A 33% decrease over three decades in families who say they definitely have dinner regularly as a whole family. (This finding is from repeated annual surveys of American families.²) In a 1995 national poll, only one-third of U.S. families said they "usually have their evening meal together on a daily basis."³
- Vacations: A 28% decrease over two decades in number of families taking a vacation (from annual surveys of American families).²
- Religious participation: a decline of 40% in hours per week in children's (ages 3-12) religious participation time from 1981-1997¹; and a decline of 24% of high school students with weekly religious attendance (from 40% in 1981 to 31% in 1997, based on annual surveys of high school students⁴).

3. Major increases from 1981-1997 in children's time

- Structured sports: doubled from 2 hours, 20 minutes per week to 5 hours, 17 minutes per week from 1981-1997. Boys and girls increased equally in structured sports time, but boys spent still spent twice as much time as girls in sports.
- Passive, spectator leisure (not counting television or other forms of "screen time"): five fold increase from 30 minutes per week to over three hours per week. This includes watching siblings play structured sports.
- Studying: increased by almost 50% from 1981-1997.

The Value of Family Meals for Children and Youth

1. Young Children. The University of Michigan study of children's time found that more meal time at home was the single strongest predictor of better achievement scores and fewer behavioral problems. Meal time was more powerful than time spent in school, studying, church, playing sports, or art activities. (Results were statistically controlled for age and gender of child, race and ethnicity, education and age of the head of the family, family structure and employment, income, and family size.)¹
2. Adolescents. The largest federally funded study of American teenagers found a strong association between regular family meals (five or more dinners per week with a parent) and academic success, psychological adjustment, and lower rates of alcohol use, drug use, early sexual behavior, and suicidal risk. (Results held for both one parent and two parent families and after controlling for social class factors).²
3. Regular family dinners and nutritional intake. A medical study of children ages 9-14 found that children who have more regular dinners with their families have more healthful dietary patterns, including more fruits and vegetables, less saturated and trans fat, fewer fried foods and sodas, and more vitamins and other micronutrients. (Findings were based on children's own reports of what they ate in the last 24 hours, and held up after statistical controls for household income, maternal employment, body mass index, physical activity, and other factors.)⁶

Concerns of Children and Youth

1. Children's concerns: A national poll of children ages 9-14 found that only 32% say they spend a lot of time with their parents. The two major reasons they gave for lack of togetherness were parents work schedules and their own schedules.⁷
2. Teens' concerns: In a 2000 national YMCA poll of a representative sample of American teens, 21% of teens rated "not having enough time together with parents" as their top concern. This tied with educational worries as their chief concern.⁸

Study References

1. Sandra L. Hofferth, "Changes in American Children's Time, 1981-1997." University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, Center Survey, January, 1999. National probability samples of American families with children ages 3-12, using time diary data from 1981 and 1997. Findings on how time use is associated with children's well-being are reported in Hofferth, S. L. (2001). How American Children Spend Their Time. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 63, 295-308.
2. Robert Putnam, Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000. Putnam reports on the decline in dinners and vacations, using yearly polls of national probability samples of married couple households since the mid-1970s. The dinner question repeated yearly asked whether "our whole family usually eats dinner together." The percent of married respondents answering "definitely" declined from about 50 percent to 34 percent from 1977-1999. Putnam also reports that, although TV watching has increased in American homes, watching TV as a family has declined by nearly 25 percent.
3. RGA Communications, The 1995 Kentucky Fried Chicken Family Dinner Survey: a national poll that found that 32.8% of parents say they have dinner together "on a regular basis," 41.3% say they have dinner together "several times a week," 13.6% have it "once a week" and 10.3% several times a month. About 58% have the TV on during dinner. Other polls that don't specify "daily" dinners tend to report higher rates.
4. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Trends in the Well-Being of America's Children and Youth, 1999." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of HHS. Compilation of national surveys of teens.
5. Council of Economic Advisers to the President. "Teens and Their Parents in the 21st Century: An Examination of Trends in Teen Behavior and the Role of Parental Involvement." Report released May, 2000. Analysis of the Adolescent Health Study, using a national probability sample of adolescents and parents.
6. Gillman, M.W., Rifas-Shiman, S.L., Frazier, A.L., Rockette, H.R.H., Camargo, C.A., Field, A.E., Berkey, C.S., & Colditz, G.A. (2000). Family dinners and diet quality among older children and adolescents. Archives of Family Medicine, 9,235-240. A questionnaire using (24 hour recall) that was mailed to children of participants in the ongoing Nurses Health Study II.
7. Poll conducted in 2002 on a nationally representative sample of 746 children, ages 9-14, for the Center for the New American Dream, Takoma Park, Maryland.
8. Global Strategy Group, Inc., "Talking With Teens: The YMCA Parent and Teen Survey." Final Report, April, 2000. National probability sample of teens who were asked to list their chief concerns. Teens of all ages listed not enough time with their parents as the top concern.