

Parental Time Investments by Same- and Different-Sex Couples

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Public debate on same-sex marriage focuses on perceived disadvantages that children raised by same-sex couples face. Despite this argument, little evidence suggests that children raised by two parents of the same sex fair worse than children raised by two different-sex parents. These studies that examine child outcomes to try and say something about parenting, however, are limited by problems of sample selection and size, and by not directly measuring parenting practices. This study addresses these limitations in two important ways. First, by directly examining the amount and type of time parents in different- and same-sex couples spend with children, with time considered an important parenting investment. And second, by using a large, nationally-representative sample of U.S. parents. Although the sample of same-sex parents included in this study ($n = 134$) is still small by conventional population-based study standards, this sample is still larger than many other studies that rely on convenience sampling to examine parenting practices in same-sex two-parent families and has the advantage of being drawn from a randomized sampling frame.

The aim of this study, then, is to identify whether there are differences in the amount and type of time parents in same- versus different-sex partnerships spend with their children. In addition to examining time accessible to children and time engaged in child-focused activities, we also examine a measure of family togetherness—a measure of time spent with children when both parents are present and thought to have special advantages for children, net of time investments parents make individually. Importantly, this measure of “dense” time can shed light on the role gender plays in the household division of labor and the persistence of the intensification of motherhood.

Method

Data and sample. We pooled data from the 2003-2017 American Time Use Surveys, a representative sample of the U.S. adult population. We limited the sample to respondents who identify living with a spouse or unmarried partner and have at least one of their own children residing with them ($n = 53,478$).

Measures. The focal independent measure was a series of dummies indicating the respondents’ gender and the gender of their spouse or unmarried partner: 1) woman with a male partner; 2) woman with a female partner ($n = 101$); 3) man with a female partner; or 4) man with a male partner ($n = 33$). Because of the small number of men with male partners in this sample and the lack of significant differences between this group and the others, we present but do not discuss the findings for this group.

We examined several measures of time. First, *any time with children* present, regardless of the activity being conducted. Second, *child-focused time with children* present, which measures the time spent in activities that were explicitly focused on the child, such as reading to them, playing, helping with homework, bathing, or driving them to extracurricular activities. Third, *family togetherness* measured the amount of time where both the respondents’ child(ren) and partner was present. This was measured for both any time spent with children and child-focused time.

A wide range of covariates were included in the model, including: respondents’ age, race/ethnicity, nativity, education, employment status (full time, part time, unemployed, not working), and student status, their partners’ education and employment status, family income, number of children in the home, age and gender of the children, urbanicity, region (Northeast, Midwest, South, West), and time diary information (year, weekend day, summer month, holiday).

Analytic plan. We employed OLS regression models, examining trends in the association between family structure and parental time investments. Predicted minutes are displayed in the figures. Missing data were handled through multiple imputation and weights were used to account for the complex survey design.

Findings

Table 1 presents the coefficients from the OLS regression models for several different measures of time. Model 1 shows any time spent with children, whereas Model 2 presents the time spent on child-focused activities. Overall, there was no statistical difference in overall or child-focused time spent with children between mothers with male versus female partners. Men with female partners, however, spent less overall and child-focused time compared to women, regardless of whether women were in a same- or opposite-

sex partnership. In total, women spent, on average, over six and half hours with children, with eighty of those minutes spent in child-focused activities, compared to five and half hours and one hour respectively, for men with female partners (predicted minutes not presented here). Model 3 presents similar findings, calculating the proportion of nonwork time (i.e., “free” time) spent on child-focused activities. Again, the finding is less about family structure, per se, but gender, with women, regardless of their partners’ gender, spending a greater proportion of their nonwork time on child-focused activities.

Model 4 examines whether, despite women spending more time with children, that the composition of that time may be qualitatively different. Again, women, regardless of whether they have a male or female partner, spent a greater proportion of their time with children in child-focused activities than men with female partners. Figure 1 presents these predicted proportions, showing that women with female partners spent close to one-quarter of their time with children in these focused activities, compared to one-fifth among women with male partners, and 17% among men with female partners.

Thus far, these findings shown time spent with children by individual parents, however this does not reflect the total parental time investment experienced by children in two-parent families. Figure 2 extrapolates these findings to the family-level by pairing the predicted minutes spent on child-focused activities by women with male partners with men with female partners (creating total time in different-sex couples) and doubling the minutes for women and men in same-sex partnerships (creating total time in same-sex couples). A clear time advantage emerges for children with two female parents, with women in same-sex partnerships spending 160 minutes in child-focused activities versus 140 minutes by parents in different-sex unions.

The finding that women in same-sex unions were spending statistically similar amounts of time with children as women in different-sex unions was interesting, given the well-documented gender inequality in child care and housework that might necessitate women compensate for the lower rates of housework and child care conducted by men. One hypothesis for this finding, then, is that women in same-sex partnerships are not “trading off” child care duties, but instead increasing their “togetherness” time where both parents are parenting together. This would be in line with time diary studies that contain diary data for both spouses, which have shown that mothers increase their time with children—instead of scaling back—when their male partners increase their time, creating more family togetherness time.

Models 5 and 6 examine the amount of time spent with children where both parents are present. In line with the hypothesis presented, women in same-sex partnerships spent more overall and child-focused time with children with their partner present than women with male partners. Figure 3 presents these findings as predicted minutes, displaying the amount of time spent on child-focused time (regardless of whether partners were present) versus child-focused time when the partner was present. Overall, women with female partners spent over 30 minutes a day on child-focused activities with their spouse present, representing 40% of all time spent on child-focused activities, versus 23 minutes and just over a quarter of the time spent on child-focused activities for women with male partners.

Figure 4 extrapolates these findings to the family level with similar conclusions. Not only did children with two female parents experience more child-focused minutes where at least one adult was present compared to children who lived with a female and a male parent (161 vs. 141 minutes), but a greater number of those minutes and proportion of all child-focused time was with both parents present (63 vs. 46 minutes and 39% vs. 33% of child-focused time, respectively).

Summary

In line with prior research, women, regardless of whether they have a same- or different-sex partner, spent more time with children and more time on child-focused activities than men with female partners. In addition, a greater *proportion* of their time with children was spent on child-focused activities. A clear time advantage emerges for children with two female parents, however, when these findings are extrapolated to the family-level. Importantly, a greater proportion of time with children with two mothers was with both parents present, which partly explains this same-sex time advantage and potentially has appreciable developmental implications for children. These findings demonstrate that children with two female parents experience more time investments—both overall and in more developmentally-rich ways—and that policy and political focus on whether parents’ gender homophily matters is somewhat misplaced. Instead, other factors, such as income and education which are more strongly tied to parental time investments in children, should be of greater concern to policy makers.

Tables and figures

Table 1. Time spent parenting in two-parent families ($N = 53,478$)

	Any time with child	Child-focused time	% of nonwork time child- focused	% of any time child-focused	Any family togetherness	Child-focused family togetherness
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
<i>Panel A</i>						
Family structure (ref: Women with male partners)						
Women with female partners	2.45 (27.91)	-1.10 (13.98)	0.38 (1.07)	2.44 (3.57)	54.14* (26.66)	8.91 (8.86)
Men with male partners	-58.41 (47.44)	-10.14 (19.69)	-1.55 (1.39)	-1.18 (5.02)	-0.37 (35.64)	-10.30+ (6.03)
Men with female partners	-63.00*** (2.91)	-22.05*** (1.14)	-1.92*** (0.10)	-3.31*** (0.32)	17.92*** (2.26)	0.68 (0.65)
R-squared	0.31	0.26	0.25	0.19	0.21	0.09
<i>Panel B</i>						
Family structure (ref: Men with female partners)						
Women with female partners	65.45* (27.93)	20.95 (13.98)	2.30* (1.07)	5.75 (3.57)	36.22 (26.67)	8.23 (8.87)
Men with male partners	4.59 (47.42)	11.91 (19.67)	0.37 (1.39)	2.13 (5.02)	-18.29 (35.65)	-10.98+ (6.04)
Women with male partners	63.00*** (2.91)	22.05*** (1.14)	1.92*** (0.10)	3.31*** (0.32)	-17.92*** (2.26)	-0.68 (0.65)
R-squared	0.31	0.26	0.25	0.19	0.21	0.09

Robust standard errors in parentheses

Note: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, + $p < 0.10$. Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Controlling for: respondents' age, race/ethnicity, nativity, education, employment status (full time, part time, unemployed, not working), and student status, their partners' education and employment status, family income, number of children in the home, age and gender of the children, urbanicity, region (Northeast, Midwest, South, West), and time diary information (year, weekend day, summer month, holiday).

Figure 1. Proportion of time spent with children on child-focused activities

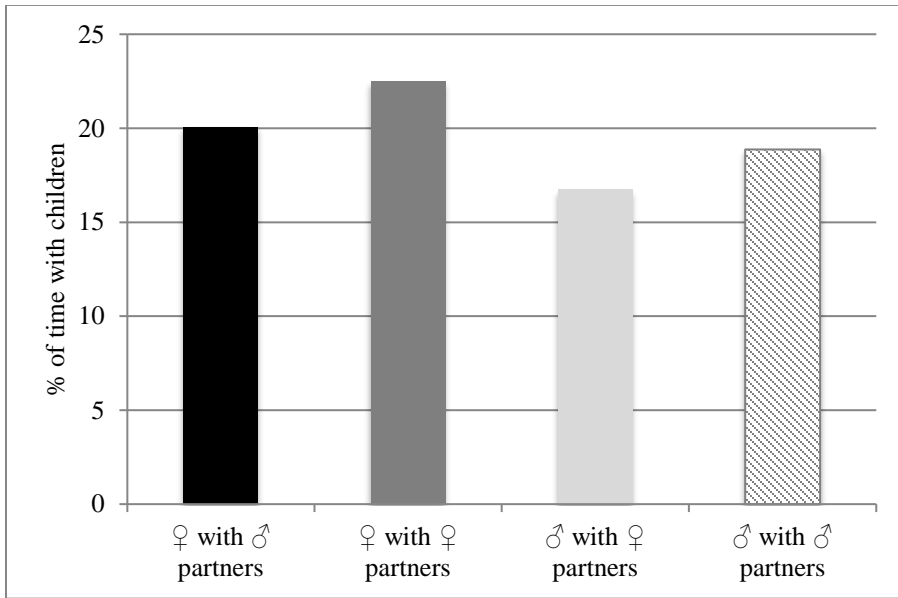


Figure 2. Time spent on child-focused activities in couples

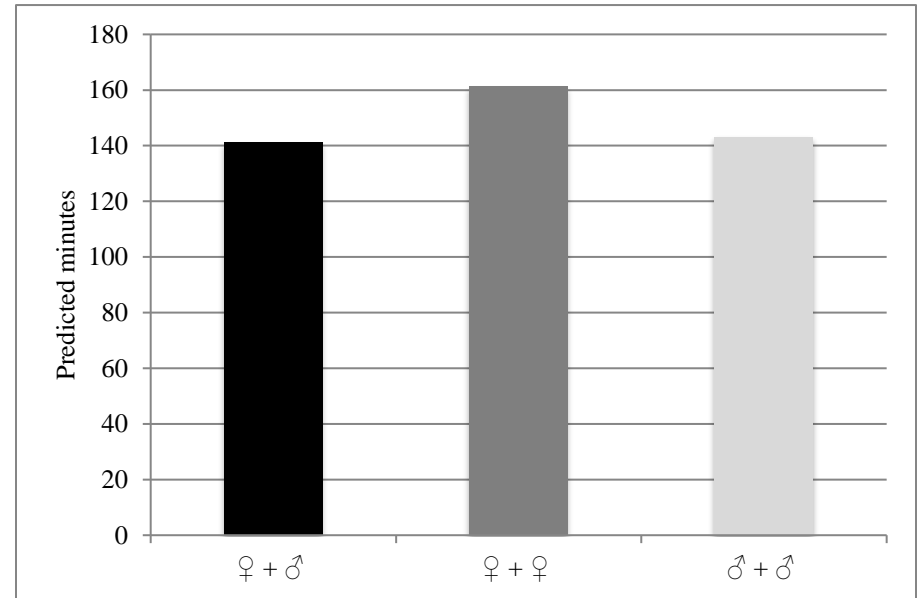


Figure 3. Time spent on child-focused activities with partner and child present

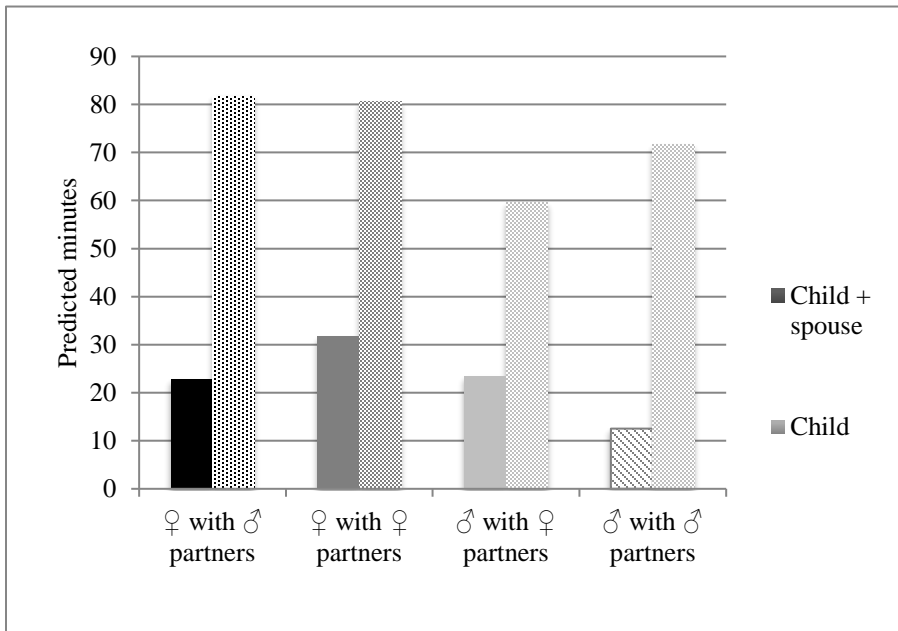


Figure 4. Time spent on child-focused activities with partner present in couples

