

Children's Time Use

Pablo Gracia
Trinity College Dublin

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Introduction

To understand children's time use we must first look at its development. Contemporary societies have been labelled as 'child-oriented', in which an enormous amount of material and emotional resources is spent on children. Sociologists and anthropologists have referred to the contemporary 'privatization' of childhood. Demographers and economists see modern families as valuing more the 'quality' than the 'quantity' of children. As put by Viviana Zelizer, contemporary children are economically useless, but emotionally priceless.

Yet, societal perceptions and conditions on what children do have changed dramatically over history. Social historians like Philippe Ariès described an increasing 'sentimentality' around the child starting from the late 17th century, in parallel with a decline of child mortality and an intensification of the nuclear family. The massive socio-economic changes of early industrialization did not, however, bring higher protection for the majority of children. Historical archives from Western Europe and the US from the 19th century reveal how boys and girls began to engage in paid or unpaid work at very early ages. This made childhood shorter, and the transition from childhood to youth, clearly blurred.

During the early 20th century children's time use experienced a strong transformation. Child labor was banned in many countries. Primary school systems were progressively universalized. The public developed new conceptions around children, increasingly seen as

‘vulnerable’ subjects, while modern scientific theories emphasized the importance of child stimulation. Attitudes towards children’s independence started to develop. This was clear among urban middle-upper classes, living in affluent conditions and expressing a marked ‘sentimentality’ towards children. This was less evident in working-class families, where children were exposed to stricter norms and more disciplinary practices at home, influenced by the difficult working conditions that disadvantaged mothers and fathers faced in domestic and paid work. By the mid 20th century, children’s play, unstructured leisure and private consumption reflected important changes in time use.

Since the 1960s children’s time use has continued to change. Opinion surveys showed increasing moral concerns or panic around children’s lack of protection. During the 20th century the average parent shifted from more ‘authoritarian’ or ‘strict’ to rather ‘permissive’. The last decades have witnessed the emergence of what Diana Baumrind defines as ‘authoritative’ and ‘involved’ parents, who are actively engaged in protecting, orchestrating and directing children’s time use. Time-use data from the UK and US from 1960 to 2015 shows radical changes in parents’ and children’s daily activities. Especially since the 1980s, in many industrialized countries, children’s time use has become highly structured. Children have increased their time spent with both mothers *and* fathers, spending also increasing amounts of screen-based time. In the 21st century, a global ‘child-oriented norm’ seems to have driven children to a more rushed, controlled and scheduled organization of their daily lives. In this context, we need to understand the factors that lead children to spend time in specific activities in contemporary societies.

Theoretical Perspectives on Children’s Time Use

Classical theories on childhood and children’s lives have discussed the role of two key aspects: ‘environments’ and ‘agency’. The first refers to ‘external’ factors from the environment in which

children are socialized, including material, relational or symbolic resources that are available to children, which affect their everyday life activities. The second conceptualizes children as ‘subjects’ with agency, conceiving the child as an actor with intrinsic personal attributes which lead to spending more or less energy, effort and time on specific activities. Recent research argues that children have agency, but also that their daily activities during their life-course development are strongly influenced and constrained by environmental factors.

Children’s time use has been conceptualized along three main analytical levels. First, at the ‘micro level’, the *child’s characteristics* are argued to intersect with *family conditions*, affecting how parents and families with different incomes, time constraints, and norms influence children’s time use. At the ‘meso level’, *communities* (e.g. neighborhoods with different collective resources) and *schools* (e.g. pedagogic strategy, resources and school composition) have been argued to exert a critical role in children’s daily activities. Third, at the ‘macro level’, public policies and school reforms can provide support to families, communities or schools, allowing such institutions to cope with constraints in supervising and stimulating children’s developmental time use.

Empirical Evidence on Children’s Time Use

Quantitative and qualitative studies provide relevant evidence on the factors influencing children’s time use. Studies found that girls are more active than boys in reading and studying, as well as in domestic chores, and boys are more prone to be high TV and electronic users. Girls spend much less time than boys on active leisure and sports. Also, gender gaps in children’s time use increase strongly during late childhood and adolescence. As children age, they generally spend more time doing homework, sleep less and spend less time with parents. From late childhood and early adolescence there is a sharp increase of children’s screen-based activities.

Parents' characteristics predict important variations in children's time use. Children with parents in privileged social positions disproportionately engage in structured leisure, cultural and educational routines, and are actively supervised by parents in activities with human and cultural capital implications. In less-privileged families, children spend more time without parental supervision and in front of the screen (i.e., TV time). This captures socioeconomic gaps in resources and intensive parenting norms, contributing to the reproduction of social inequalities, as argued – amongst others – by sociologist Annette Lareau. Children with parents, and especially mothers, with long and inflexible work conditions, and those in single-parent families, were generally found to disproportionately engage in less-developmental time use, arguably as a result of differences in parents' time constraints and stress levels.

To date, the literature has provided insufficient evidence in three directions that need further examination. First, little is known on how children's time use changes from infancy to the transition to adulthood. Second, the role of neighborhoods and schools in shaping children's daily activities is today poorly understood. Third, cross-national research on parental care time has not yet been translated into rich cross-country research on children's time use. More research in these directions will be needed in the future.

Conclusion

Children's time use has become increasingly structured, supervised by parents, and screen based across different industrialized countries over recent decades, in parallel to a shift towards a 'child-centered' society driven by intensive parenting ideologies. Time-diary data show key gender and age differences in children's time use, but intersecting with inequalities in monetary, time, and norms across parents and families. Future research should further analyze three main

lines of research: (i) longitudinal changes from infancy to the transition to adulthood; (ii) the role of neighborhoods and schools; (iii) cross-country evidence on children's time use.

References

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