

# Women take on more childcare, even when in full-time work: Poll

## NUS study shows fathers recording the lowest amount of time in caregiving and achievement-oriented activities



Professor Jean Yeung says the survey results reflect the “second shift” at home that working mothers take on, especially on weekdays after a full day of work.

**Amelia Teng**

Women are shouldering more childcare responsibilities than men, even if both parties are working full-time, a new study has found.

Research from the National University of Singapore (NUS) has shown that mothers spend twice as much time with their young children compared with fathers on weekdays.

On weekends, the gap is smaller, but mothers still clock in more time on childcare than their husbands.

“As the children get older from birth to six years old, the fathers’ time with them increases only slightly,” said the study’s principal investigator, Professor Jean Yeung.

These findings were from the Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study, conducted by NUS’ Centre for Family and Population Research, to examine children’s early childhood development.

The Ministry of Education-funded study completed its first wave of data collection last year from a nationally representative sample of 5,021 Singaporean children aged up to six and their primary caregivers.

Overall, on average, it found that mothers spend three hours and 51 minutes directly engaged with their child on weekdays, compared with one hour and 44 minutes for fathers.

Although fathers spend more time with their child on weekends – six hours and 8 minutes – this was

still lower than the 7.5 hours their wives put in.

There were also variations: On a weekday, almost a third of the children have a father who put in more than three-quarters of the time their wives gave. Of this group, about 21 per cent had fathers who contributed equally or more than the mother.

On the other hand, 37 per cent of the children have a father who spends less than a quarter of the time the mother puts in.

Prof Yeung told *The Straits Times*: “One thing that jumps out is that on average, fathers’ time on weekdays is almost the same whether the mother is working or a stay-home mum.”

These results were based on the time diaries of 4,719 children who lived with both biological parents. Respondents – 95 per cent of whom were mothers as they were the primary caregivers of the child – were asked to record each of their children’s activities over 24 hours on a randomly selected weekday as well as on a weekend day.

They were also asked to fill in with whom the child was involved in each activity, if any.

Face-to-face interviews were done for all households. Almost three-quarters of mothers and 97 per cent of fathers in the study were working mostly full-time, and a third of the households had a domestic helper. A quarter of families had a grandparent living with them.

The study also looked at five broad types of childcare activities:

caregiving, play and companionship, social activities such as going out to visit family and friends, achievement-oriented activities, and travel.

Mothers spend more time with a child than fathers across all five categories, with fathers recording the lowest in caregiving and achievement-oriented activities. These refer to reading, homework, or extra-curricular lessons, among others.

But fathers do better in play and companionship activities, particularly in sports on weekends, compared with other areas.

Prof Yeung said the results reflect the “second shift” at home that working mothers take on, especially on weekdays after a full day of work. “I don’t think it’s because women are biologically better at multitasking; it’s a matter of cultural and social expectations and practices.”

This has implications for the quality of marriage and relationships in the family, she added.

“When the paid and unpaid working hours for women are so high, it leaves little personal time for rest and leisure, and this can create high stress and depression even among mothers,” she said.

“We should not assume couples are happy with such division of labour,” she said, adding that gender equality at home and in the labour markets go hand in hand.

Prof Yeung is working on a paper based on the study with her co-author, Dr Lee Jiyeon, a post-doctoral fellow at NUS’ Centre for Family and Population Research.

“We have to pay more attention to encouraging more fathers’ involvement at home especially on the weekdays, in this era when

most women are working full-time in Singapore,” said Prof Yeung.

Having fathers more involved also benefits children’s development, as research has shown. It can also help reduce family tension and conflict, and potentially increase fertility, she said.

“Research also shows that fathers are also happier when they’re more involved with their children, and sharing more activities with their partners,” she added.

Another finding was that fathers with higher levels of education or higher socio-economic status spend more time with their children than other fathers in almost all activities on both a weekday and a weekend day.

These tended to be fathers with highly educated working wives.

In particular, the fathers spend more time with their children on achievement-oriented activities. A child whose home is a condominium or landed property spends nearly four hours a week with his or her father on those activities, compared with 38 minutes for those living in HDB rental units, for instance.

“Couples who are both highly educated have more egalitarian gender relations, spend more equal time with children, and behave more like ‘co-pilots’ in the family rather than having a division of labour that treats domestic labour as the sole responsibility of a woman,” said Prof Yeung.

With more parents working from home due to the Covid-19 situation, she expects fathers have chipped in more for childcare and housework, although attitudes and behaviour do not change that rapidly.

“I do hope the social norms of dads sharing greater parental re-

sponsibility will form more quickly as a result,” she said.

Other family experts share similar sentiments.

Ms Skye Tan, family life specialist from Focus on the Family Singapore, said its own survey of fathers from May 25 to June 7 found that seven in 10 of them reported being more involved with their families during the circuit breaker period.

These fathers may be more willing to explore flexible work down the road, or have stronger resolve to be more involved with their children after work hours, she added.

Children learn about gender norms and behaviours by watching their parents, said Ms Tan.

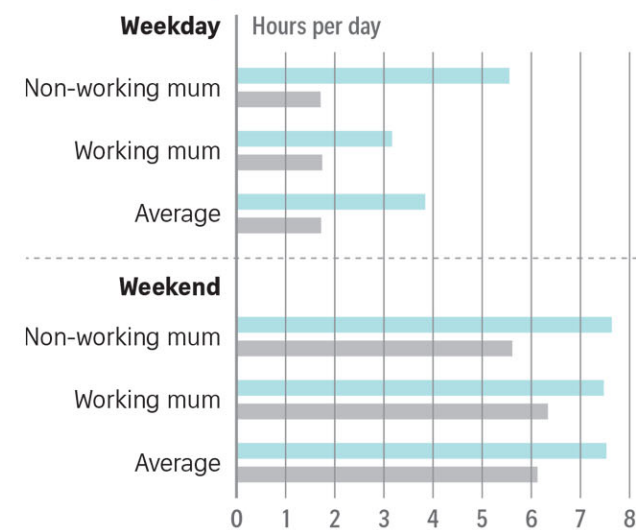
“It’s often said that we parent like how we were parented... Parents influence our kids’ future beliefs, attitudes and actions in every area and they are definitely watching – and will, in turn, model – the examples we are living out in front of them.”

ateng@sph.com.sg

### Time spent with parents

■ Mother ■ Father

Amount of time a child spends with parents by mother’s working status



Note: The figures refer to the amount of time a child is directly engaged in an activity with his or her parents.

Source: SINGAPORE LONGITUDINAL EARLY DEVELOPMENT STUDY  
STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS