



Preschool Children's Time with their Fathers in Singapore

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Background

Research shows that having quality time with fathers in early childhood contributes to father-child attachment and predicts children's development. Father's involvement in childcare also has positive long-term effects on child development. Many empirical studies, however, have reported that fathers' time with children continue to be less than mothers' time.

Some studies stress that the pattern of children's time use with their parents varies by national contexts including social policies, norms, or/and cultures. This study provides a nuanced understanding in the quality and quantity of Singaporean young children's time with their fathers. Singapore is a highly developed country with great cultural and socioeconomic diversity in Southeast Asia. The Singapore Longitudinal EARly Development Study (SG LEADS), conducted by NUS Centre for Family and Population Research, provides young children's time diary data that is invaluable for studying children's time with their parents in Singapore (See details in Yeung, Lee, & Lee, 2021).

Several unique features of Singapore may influence fathers' time with children. First, Singapore is a wealthy country with increasing inequality in recent years. In 2019, the per capita GDP of Singapore is over 65,000 USD (The World Bank, 2020), but the average monthly household income from work among the 1st decile was less than 1,500 USD (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2021). This unequal distribution of wealth is intensified as assortative marriages has increased over time. In 2019, about 70% of the nation's total marriage were reported as educational assortative marriages in which couples have a similar level of education (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2020). Second, as in other Asian countries, grandmothers play an important role in childcare in Singapore. Singapore government explicitly encourages working mothers to receive supports for childcare from children's grandparents through tax policy. The "Grandparent caregiver relief" supports working mothers whose children are being cared for by their non-working grandparents to receive income tax relief of SGD 3,000 per year (Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore, 2021). Third, many Singaporean families outsource domestic labor and caregiving to foreign domestic helpers. According to SG LEADS data, one-third of households with children aged 0-6 have a live-in domestic helper. The Singapore government has facilitated the import of foreign domestic workers.

Under these policy and cultural contexts, childcare distribution in Singapore may not simply be an issue for couples to negotiate between themselves but also involves the extent to which families outsource childcare. In Yeung & Lee (2021, April 7), we investigated how fathers' involvement time varies by family circumstances.

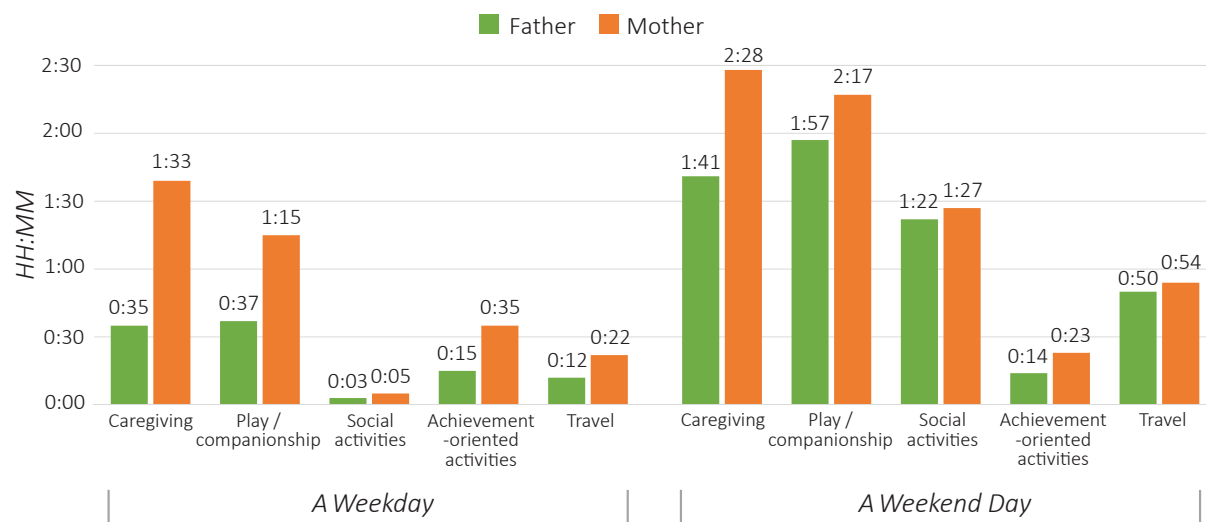
Data and Methods

We used Singaporean young children's time diary data from 4,715 preschool children aged 0-6 living with both their biological or adoptive mothers and fathers in SG LEADS. We found factors that affect a child's time with his/her father in 6 categories of activities- caregiving, play and companionship activities, social activities, achievement-oriented activities, travel and all activities combined. Parental education level, household income per capita, whether has a live-in helper, and whether co-reside with a grandmother, mother's working hours, the share of mother's earnings in household income, and mother's gender ideology were factors that could influence children's time with fathers.

Results

Figure 1 shows the time a child was directly interacting with a parent on a weekday or a weekend day. As shown, children spent more time with their parents on a weekend day than on a weekday, and they spent more time with their mothers than fathers across all activities. The activities that children spent the most time with their parents was caregiving. On average, children were cared for by mothers for 1 hour and 33 minutes on a weekday and 2 hours and 28 minutes on a weekend day, while they were cared for by fathers for 35 minutes on a weekday and 1 hour and 41 minutes on a weekend day. The activity that children spent the most time with their fathers was play and companionship such as watching TV and playing, although mothers' engagement time in these activities was longer than that of fathers (Weekday - 0:37 with father, 1:15 with mother; Weekend - 1:57 with father, 2:17 with mother).

Figure 1. Mean time a child is engaged with the parents on a weekday and a weekend day



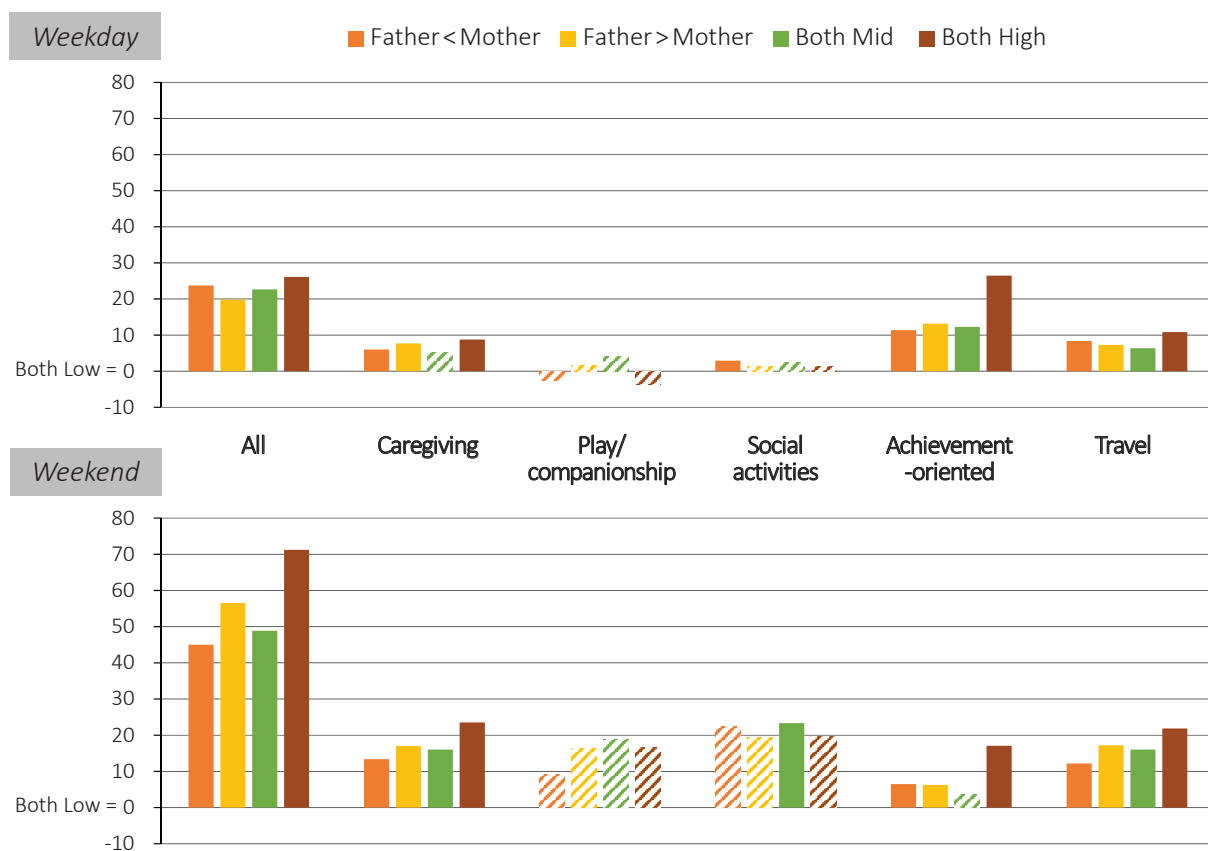
In multivariate analysis, we found that on a weekday, mother's working hours, relative earnings, and gender ideologies made no difference in children's time with their fathers, except for the travel time. For models for weekend day time use, children with working mothers spent more time with their fathers in caregiving and play/companionship. Children of mothers who have more egalitarian gender ideology spent more time with their fathers in social activities and travel. Parental education level, household income per capita, whether having a live-in helper, and whether co-residing with a grandmother made statistically significant differences in children's time with their fathers in some activities. The parental education level was categorized into 5 groups – (1) Both Low (secondary or below), (2) Both Mid

(post-secondary or diploma), (3) Both High (bachelors' degree or higher), (4) Mother having a higher education level than the Father, and (5) Father having a higher education level than the Mother. The differences by parental education and family income were much greater on weekends than on weekdays.

Figure 2 shows that children of highly educated parents were cared for by their fathers more than children of parents with low education levels. They also spent more time with their fathers in achievement-oriented activities and travel on both weekdays and weekends. A child of "Both High" parents spent their time with a father about 26 minutes more on a weekday and 71 minutes more on a weekend day, compared to a child of "Both Low" parents. Specifically, for achievement-oriented activities, children of "Both High" parents spent about 26 minutes more with their fathers on a weekday and about 17 minutes more on a weekend day than children of "Both Low" parents did.

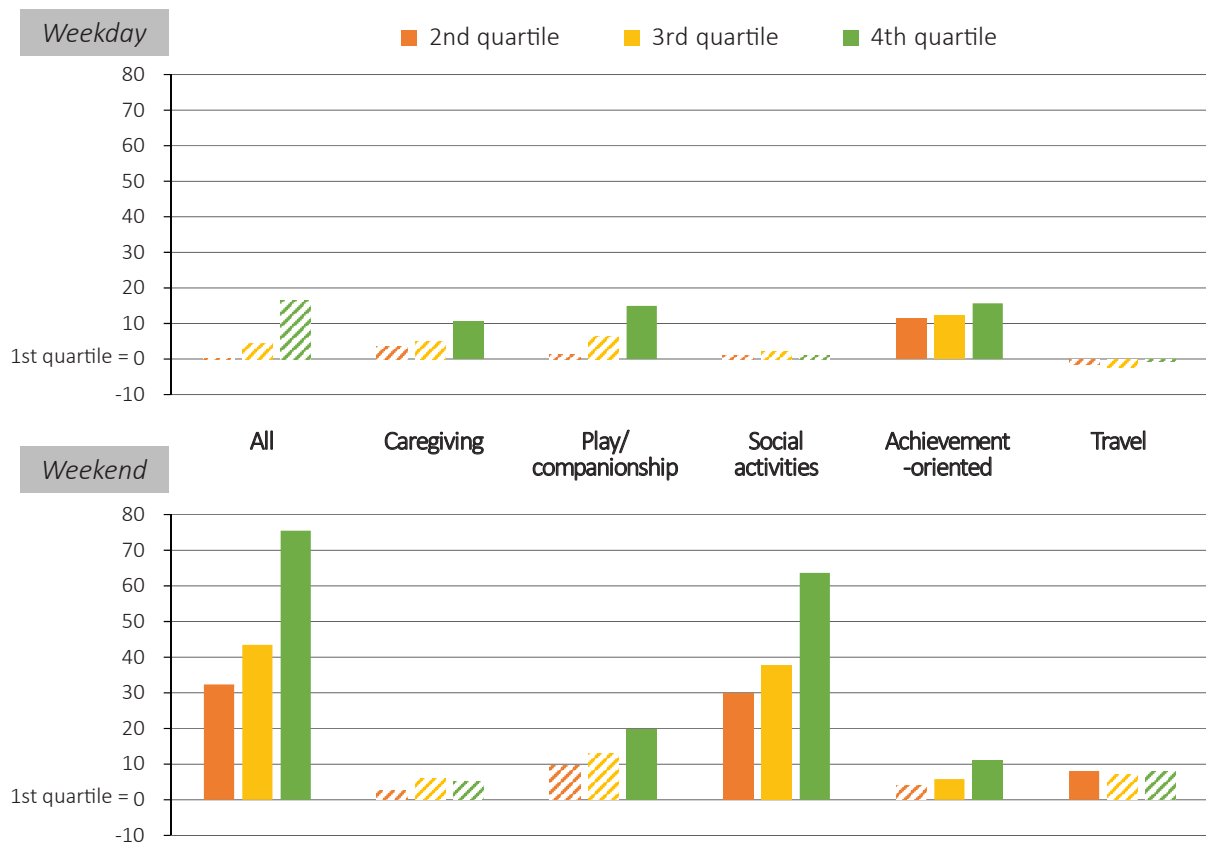
Figure 3 shows that on a weekend day, children in households of the highest annual income group (labelled "4th quartile") spent about 1 hour and 15 minutes more with their fathers than children in households of the lowest annual income group (labelled "1st quartile") did. As to social activities, children of the highest annual income group spent 1 hour and 4 minutes more with their fathers than children of the lowest income group did. Compared to children of the lowest income group, children of the highest income group spent 16 minutes more on a weekday and 11 minutes more on a weekend day with their fathers in achievement-oriented activities. For play and companionship activities, children in highest-income families spent 15 minutes more on a weekday and 20 minutes more on a weekend day with their fathers compared to children of the lowest-income families.

Figure 2. Estimates on time a child spent with father by parents' education level



Note. These estimates are marginal effects in Tobit regression models after controlling other variables. The value of the 'Both-Low' group is zero as a reference group. The bars represent the time difference between the "Both-Low" group and that particular group. The shaded bars indicate the difference is not statistically significant.

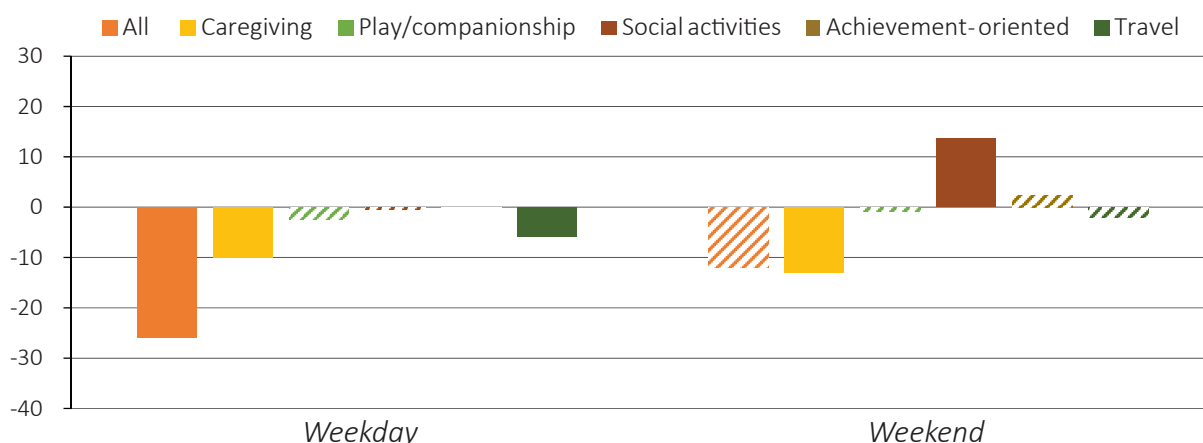
Figure 3. Estimates on time a child spent with father by household income (by quartile)



Note. These estimates are marginal effects in Tobit regression models after controlling other variables. The value of the ‘1st quartile’ group is zero as a reference. The bars represent the time difference between the “1st quartile” group to that particular group. The slashed bars indicate non-significant effects.

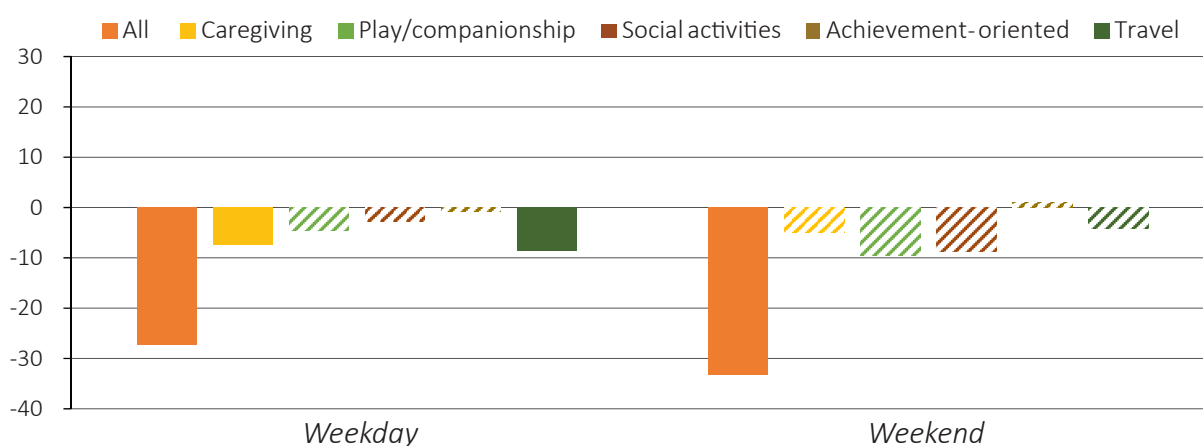
Figure 4 and Figure 5 presents the differences in children’s time with fathers between children who live with alternative caregivers (domestic helper and grandmother) and those who do not. Figure 4 shows that children who live with a domestic helper spent 26 minutes less with their fathers on a weekday than children who live without a domestic helper, but there was no statistical difference in the amount of total time spent with fathers on a weekend day between them. As to caregiving activities, children who live with a domestic helper spent 10 minutes less on a weekday and 13 minutes less even on a weekend day being cared for by their fathers than those who live without a domestic helper. Children who live with a domestic helper spent 6 minutes less with their fathers in travel on a weekday, and 14 minutes more in social activities with their fathers on a weekend day than those who live without a domestic helper did. Figure 5 shows that grandmothers make a difference in children’s total time with their fathers on both weekdays and weekends. Children who live with grandmothers spent 27 minutes less with their fathers on a weekday and 33 minutes less on a weekend day. On a weekday, children living with their grandmothers spent 7 minutes less being cared for by fathers and 9 minutes less with fathers in travel.

Figure 4. Estimates on time a child spent with father by whether living with a domestic helper



Note. These estimates are marginal effects in Tobit regression models after controlling other variables. The value of the ‘without live-in helper’ group is zero as a reference. The bars represent the time difference between the “without live-in helper” group to the “with a live-in helper” group. The slashed bars indicate non-significant effects.

Figure 5. Estimates on time a child spent with father by whether living with a grandmother



Note. These estimates are marginal effects in Tobit regression models after controlling other variables. The value of the ‘without live-in grandmother’ group is zero as a reference. The bars represent the time difference between the “without live-in grandmother” group to the “with a live-in helper” group. The slashed bars indicate non-significant effects.

Summary

As in other countries, the average time that Singaporean young children spent with their mothers remained significantly higher than with their fathers. This study suggests that in Singapore, the absolute level of resources at family-level are more important to explain a father’s engagement time with a child than relative resources between couples. We observed that children of parents both highly educated and children living in high-income families spent substantially more time with their fathers. Specifically, parental education and family income made clear differences in children’s time with fathers spent in achievement-oriented activities such as playing music, drawing, exercising, reading, studying, and so on. The daily time shown here accumulates to very large differences over time among families of different SES statuses. We can expect that the increasing trend of assortative marriage in Singapore will widen these gaps children spend with their fathers, which may lead to children’s developmental gaps.

We found that having a helper or a grandmother living in the household significantly reduced, rather than increased, the time a father interacted with his child which may not benefit children's development. However, it is also noteworthy that domestic helpers or grandmothers substituted for fathers' time in caregiving and travel, but not their time in playing and achievement-oriented activities which is more closely related to their social-emotional and cognitive development. The findings suggest that fathers' time in human-capital enhancing activities with children is not easily substitutable. Social and employment policy interventions should encourage greater fathers' involvement with children, both in terms of quantity and quality of time. This is particularly important for those in more disadvantaged socioeconomic status so that the gap in father's involvement among different familial socioeconomic statuses can be reduced. Daycare centres and preschools can also organize more activities or events that encourage greater fathers' involvement with children.

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