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## Special Report

# I Wish the Kids Didn't Watch So Much TV: Out of School Time in Three Low Income Communities

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*“I Wish the Kids Didn’t Watch So Much TV”*

# Out-of-School Time in Three Low Income Communities

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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School-Age Child Care Project  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Out-of-School Time Study, conducted by the School-Age Child Care Project at the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, is an investigation of how young low-income children in three urban communities spend their daytime hours outside of school. The study looks at what children are doing and where; it also examines what parents want for their children, the barriers they encounter, and the impact of maternal employment on children's out-of-school time.

These are questions that have both immediate urgency and long-term implications for school-age children and their parents, and for the nation as a whole. In the 1990s, more American children than ever are living in poverty. Violence, crime, and substance abuse have a pervasive impact on the lives of children living in at-risk urban neighborhoods, compromising their social, emotional, and cognitive development. Teachers are struggling to work with a cohort of children who are more aggressive and disorganized, and less adept with language, than their predecessors. Clearly, there is an increasing need to look beyond the walls of the classroom to other resources for children and families.

A great deal is already known about what children need to thrive, and about what causes them to languish or become troubled. The Out-of-School Time Study reviewed the literature on two kinds of research—outcome research, which examines the effects of Head Start, preschool child care, school-age child care, and self-care—and research on resiliency, which explores why some children thrive despite environmental and biological risk factors. The full report reviews the literature in detail. Less well understood—and thus the focus of our own work—is how children's needs and parents' preferences and aspirations for their children intersect with the realities of their lives.

### Why Study Children's Out-of-School Time?

Research suggests that how children spend their out-of-school hours can significantly affect their social development and school success. Even children in good schools do not get their full quota of constructive learning activities during the school day; research indicates that children who spend 20-35 hours per week engaged in constructive learning activities are significantly more likely to succeed in school. Children's out-of-school hours represent a substantial ongoing opportunity for them to learn through play, to learn how to get along with other children, and to have enduring and supportive relationships with adults. Several studies have found that school-age children's academic performance is enhanced by attending formal child-care programs of at least adequate quality. Children attending such programs have been found to have better work habits and peer relations, and to be better adjusted and less antisocial than children who spent their out-of-school hours alone, with their mothers, or informally supervised by other adults. Other studies have found how well a child gets along with other children to be a better predictor of adult adjustment than academic performance or classroom behavior.

*“Research suggests that how children spend their out-of-school hours can significantly affect their social development and school success.”*

## What Is At Stake for Low-Income Children?

“Out-of-school time has the potential to contribute to all three protective mechanisms.”

We decided to focus our attention on low-income children because there is considerable evidence that the stakes are particularly high for them and for their families. For children in lower-quality schools, in-school time spent on constructive activities can be as meager as seven hours per week. When low-income children attend disorganized schools, out-of-school time offers the best hope for overcoming the negative effects of poverty. There is growing evidence, in fact, that formal after-school programs can do just that. The research literature on resiliency indicates that children who successfully overcome the effects of such risk factors as poverty and exposure to violence are protected by (1) individual factors, including cognitive abilities, sociability, and language skills; (2) stable relationships with caring adults; and (3) external support from individuals and community institutions. Out-of-school time has the potential to contribute to all three protective mechanisms. Research suggests that low-income children are more isolated from their peers during the out-of-school hours than higher-income children, and have less opportunities to develop either individual skills or external relationships. Most formal after-school programs operate exclusively on parent fees, thereby excluding families who cannot pay average weekly fees of \$45. Only about one-third of school-age care programs enjoy *any* governmental support for low-income participants.

Another large and compelling body of evidence reveals that the primary out-of-school activity of many American children is watching television. On average, American children spend 40 hours a week watching television and playing video games, more hours than they spend in school. Specifically, children in low-income households are estimated to spend 50 percent more time watching television than their more affluent peers. It is known that children who watch more television than average are more obese, read less, and play less than their peers; they are also more aggressive and more fearful of violence, and have more stereotyped views of sex roles. Heavy television watching appears to have a variety of detrimental effects on children’s intellectual and social development. Furthermore, there is evidence that playing with friends during out-of-school time is associated with school achievement and adult success. Children from low-income homes, however, tend to be more isolated from peers during out-of-school time than middle-income children.

Despite evidence that unsatisfactory child-care arrangements are associated with less competent parenting and low parental morale, surprisingly little is known about how parents make decisions about their children’s out-of-school time. Our study investigated how parents feel about their children’s use of out-of-school time. We also looked at whether parents postpone employment or limit their work hours in the absence of affordable, high-quality child care.

## The Design and Methodology of the Study

Our research questions embody our interest in finding out not only what children do outside of school, but also how their parents and teachers

feel about children's out-of-school activities and the preferences and constraints that condition parents' decisions. Specifically, we posed the following questions:

1. Where are children during out-of-school time?
2. What do children do during their out-of-school time?
3. How do parents feel about how their children spend their out-of-school time?
4. What is the employment situation of the mothers of low-income children?
5. What child-care arrangements do employed mothers make?

Because we wanted to know about the out-of-school experiences of children in part-day preschool, kindergarten, and full-day first grade, the study focused on children aged 4-7 in Head Start and Transition programs. The Head Start-Public School Early Childhood Transition Project builds on the gains children have made in Head Start as they enter grade school by linking families to community services and continuing the parent involvement and parent education that are central features of the Head Start program. Funding constraints allowed us to study only three communities from among the 32 throughout the nation that have Transition demonstration projects. The need to control for certain variables, and our awareness that issues about out-of-school time differ in rural and urban areas, convinced us to limit our attention to urban communities. For reasons of geographic diversity and because they met certain other parameters, we selected Worcester, Massachusetts; St. Paul, Minnesota, and San Jose, California. At each site sixty children, evenly divided among Head Start, kindergarten, and first grade, were randomly selected for family interviews. A subsample of families also participated in focus groups and/or child observations.

The families were extremely diverse, representing 28 self-identified ethnic groups. Forty-three percent of the parents were not born in the United States, and 42 percent of the interviews were conducted in a language other than English. The most surprising demographic characteristic of the sample was its low labor-force participation: only one-third of the 180 mothers in the sample were employed. Over two-thirds of the families reported annual incomes under \$16,000, and a majority reported receiving income from AFDC and vouchers from Food Stamp programs. Over half of the parents had not completed high school, and one-quarter had not completed eighth grade, a finding reflective of the high percentage of immigrants in the sample.

Because we concluded that both hard data and the commentary of the participants themselves are valuable and enlightening in a study of this sort, we employed both quantitative and qualitative methods. Trained, bicultural, bilingual interviewers conducted personal interviews with a random sample of 180 families (60 in each city) involved in Head Start or the Transition program. The interviews included questions developed for the study, sub-scales of measures developed by others, and many

open-ended questions that gave the mother a chance to explain her answers. Social services staff from the programs completed questionnaires and attended focus groups, and we held focus groups with parents who had participated in the family interviews. In addition, we observed a total of 18 children during the after-school hours. Research staff conducted interviews with key individuals in each community as well.

### The Findings of the Out-Of-School Time Study

**Where Do Children Spend Their Out-of-School Time?** Nearly two-thirds (64%) of the children we studied spent all their out-of-school time with their mothers, a finding that is clearly related to the low labor-force participation rate of the mothers in the study. Of children who did spend some time in the care of others, older siblings were the most common nonmaternal caregivers, followed by fathers; relatives accounted for nearly half of all nonmaternal caregivers.

A substantial minority (16 percent) of children in the study regularly spent time at home alone or in the company of a sibling under age 12; average duration of sibling care was 5.2 hours per week. Surprisingly, employed mothers were no more likely to report that their children spent time in self-care or sibling care than nonemployed mothers, and the amount of time spent without adult supervision did not vary with the mother's employment status. Prior research suggests that, for children as young as those in our study, spending substantial amounts of time without adult supervision is a risk factor for development.

**What Do Children Do During Out-of-School Time?** Television was by far the most frequent out-of-school activity of the children in our study, as is true of virtually all American children. During our observations, a majority of the children spent most or all of the two-hour period in front of a television set. Research confirms that television plays an extremely important role in children's lives, probably outweighed only by school and family. For middle- and upper-income children, however, according to the National Child Care Survey of 1990, organized activities like lessons and teams account for a substantial portion of out-of-school time. Fewer than 6 percent of the children in our study, however, were enrolled in formal lessons or activities. An emphasis on practicing academic skills at home was common.

Our findings strongly suggest that community resources are more important than individual or family characteristics—including mother's employment status, family background, family income, and child's gender—in determining how children spend their after-school time. We found notable variations among the three cities, suggesting that availability and accessibility of neighborhood resources plays a decisive role in how children spent out-of-school time. Worcester parents were significantly more likely than St. Paul or San Jose parents to say that their children watched television frequently, and less likely to say that their children played outside, suggesting a possible tradeoff between the two activities. In general,

"Television was by far the most frequent out-of-school activity of the children in our study, as is true of virtually all American children."

Worcester parents felt that they had fewer options for their children than parents in the other two cities.

**What Do Parents Want for Their Children?** We found a sharp discontinuity between children's actual after-school activities and what their parents wanted for them. Over half (54 percent) of parents stated that they would make changes in their current out-of-school time arrangements if they could. Many parents reported that they would like to enroll their children in lessons and other organized activities but were prevented from doing so by prohibitive cost, transportation difficulties, worries about neighborhood safety, and a shortage of available options.

Many parents were not happy about the role of television in their children's lives: over half wanted their children to spend less time watching television. Most wished their children could spend more time on academically related activities, enrichment activities such as hobbies and lessons, and community activities. In focus groups, parents often became excited and energized when they had an opportunity to talk about alternatives to television, both at home and in the community, sharing ideas and experiences. Overall, many parents found the barriers to finding safe and affordable alternatives overwhelming.

Safety and trust emerged as major preoccupations of the parents in the study. Fully 47 percent of parents described their neighborhoods as only "fairly safe" or "unsafe." Parents who did not consider the neighborhood safe either did not let their children play outside at all or only let them do so with parental supervision. Nearly two-thirds agreed somewhat or strongly with the statement "I try to keep my children away from children of families who have different ideas or values from our own." Many parents would not allow their children to visit or invite over school friends.

More highly educated mothers were significantly less likely than other mothers to be satisfied with their child's overall after-school experience, and specifically with their child's time at home. Parents with more education may have higher expectations about activities to which children should have access; also, mothers with more schooling are significantly more likely to be employed, and employed mothers were less satisfied than nonemployed mothers. Thus education per se may be less decisive than a mother's uneasiness about her child's need for care by others due to her own absence from home.

Finally, parents whose children spend time alone or in the care of siblings are significantly less satisfied than those whose children spend all their time under adult supervision.

**Employment and Child Care.** Approximately one-third of the mothers in our sample worked, a lower maternal employment rate than for the nation as a whole. Many nonworking mothers did not seek out either employment or child care; 69 percent strongly preferred to stay home when their children are young, in keeping with their cultural traditions. In general, married women, high-school graduates, nonimmigrants, and mothers of older children were most likely to work. Those who perceived their neighborhoods as relatively safe and who had access to a car were

"We found a sharp discontinuity between children's actual after-school activities and what their parents wanted for them."

also more likely to work. Most employed mothers worked full-time and 86 percent worked at least some nontraditional hours (outside 9-5). In general, they held jobs that paid low wages and provided little opportunity for advancement.

The mothers in our sample had a level of education consistent with AFDC mothers nationally: 53 percent did not complete high school, compared to 52 percent of AFDC recipients and only 17 percent of all 25-year-old women. This figure is accounted for in part by the high percentage of immigrants in the sample.

“The determinant of employment in our sample was not marriage per se but the availability of child care from another adult in the household.”

Our finding that more married than single mothers are employed is out of keeping with trends among low-income women in the population as a whole. Interestingly, we found that the determinant of employment in our sample was not marriage per se but the availability of child care from another adult in the household.

Children of employed mothers were somewhat more likely to be in formal care after school than children whose mothers were not employed. Generally speaking, however, working mothers relied on multiple child-care arrangements, largely provided by family members. For example, 66 percent of children of employed mothers in the sample were cared for by relatives, over half by fathers or partners, and approximately one-quarter by adult relatives and older siblings. One-third of children with working mothers were enrolled in lessons, and one-quarter in after-school programs or family child care.

Many working mothers experience child-care problems if they do not have relatives willing to care for their children. The low-wage service-sector jobs available to mothers with little education often do not provide adequate income to cover child care and may require nontraditional hours when formal care is not an option. For the 16 percent of families who did pay for after-school child care, the mean payment was \$24 weekly or fully 19 percent of total family income.

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#### For further reading:

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Recommendations for Service Providers:

1. Support and create community-level collaborations among Head Start programs, schools, child care providers, cultural institutions, libraries, recreation departments, churches, youth organizations, violence-prevention programs, and other service providers. Such collaborations could address: (1) resources for leisure time, including parks, playgrounds, museums, libraries, and community festivals; (2) extension of school and Head Start hours through partnerships with child care programs; (3) lessons and recreational activities, including drop-in and community center programs; and (4) summer programs. Collaborative initiatives and actions might include:
  - Assessment of parent needs and existing community resources, and of barriers to utilization of those resources.
  - A distribution network for information about enrichment and care resources in the community.
  - Efforts to improve the quality of existing services, where such improvement is needed, including systematic methods of assessing and improving the quality of formal out-of-school settings.
  - Provision of new services to meet the out-of-school time needs of children in the community.
2. Take steps to increase the availability of free or low-cost programming for low-income children, including lessons, recreational activities, and child care. In addition to tuition or fee subsidies, supply may need to be increased, and/or other barriers such as transportation may need to be addressed.
3. Develop and disseminate materials to help parents manage their children's out-of-school time. One option is a curriculum to help parents understand how out-of-school time affects their children and make the best use of this time. Topics could include:
  - Creating a positive emotional climate
  - Use and abuse of television and video games
  - Learning about and using community resources
  - Simple activities for out-of-school time
  - Building children's social skills and supervising peer relations
  - Enrichment activities
  - Selecting child care and building a relationship with the provider
  - Summer activities and programs
4. Recognize the importance of developing trust between agencies and parents. Learn about the cultural values and norms of different groups, and work to ensure that your program is culturally sensitive. Reach out to families in a variety of ways. If possible, conduct home visits to build closer relationships with families in the program.

*"I'd like her to go somewhere and do something. She just needs a ride."*

5. Work on improving the quality of programs to ensure that the full promise of out-of-school time is met.

### **Recommendations for Policy Makers and Advocates:**

1. Increase public awareness of the importance of out-of-school time to children's development.
2. Increase public awareness of the impact of television on family life and children's development.
3. Create structures for state-level collaboration among agencies with responsibility for recreation, youth development, parent education, family support, child care, and related areas.
4. Create incentives for collaboration between service providers at the community level.
5. Create policies supporting the role of the public school as a hub for children's out-of-school services.
6. Increase funding for community out-of-school resources to improve the quality of existing services, expand services as necessary, and increase access for low-income children.
7. Develop strategies to create transportation systems to enable children to reach the locations where services are being provided.
8. Include provisions for quality child care in any policy designed to increase the labor force participation of low-income mothers.

### **Recommendations for Researchers:**

1. Conduct or support new research on children's use of out-of-school time across ages and income levels, especially nationally representative samples and research focusing on racial and/or ethnic subgroups of children.
2. Conduct or support studies of the ecology of out-of-school time and its relationship to life success; such as how socioeconomic status and other family characteristics interact with school, neighborhood, and subgroup characteristics to create barriers to or opportunities for success among low-income children.
3. Promote research that measures the effects of the quality of a child's after-school experiences on child outcomes such as school achievement, peer relations, and behavior. Such research might include studies of a single setting type, such as school-age child care, as well as comparisons of quality of care across different settings.
4. Support additional research on the nature and effects of children's interaction with adults. Measures should include both amount and type of interaction, and should examine effects on children's academic and social development.
5. Develop methodologies to accurately assess the prevalence of self-care and sibling care among different subgroups and to assess the impact of such care on children's development.