

Quality time with parents: A pandemic trend that should stay

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The pandemic has been hard on us, but one of the positives to come out of it has been the increased amount of quality time parents have spent with their children. This is especially true for fathers, who typically spend less time with their kids than mothers, and is something that all parents should strive to maintain, even once the pandemic is a memory.

A survey the U.S. Census Bureau released this month found that parents spent more time eating, reading and playing with their children from March 2020 to June 2020, when lockdowns were at their most intense. This interaction time was up significantly from previous years.

The “Survey of Income and Program Participation” was based on interviews with one parent from each of 22,000 households during the first four months of the pandemic. Of course, the survey is not a measure of absolute fact — the bureau noted it may have an inherent flaw, the fact that those who responded were different from those who did not. Specifically, the survey authors said those who responded were more likely to be older, foreign-born, married, more educated and above the poverty level than in the two prior years. However, it is the best indicator right now of the impact of the pandemic on parental involvement.

According to the survey, the proportion of meals parents shared with their children increased from 56% to 63% for some, and 69% of parents reported reading to young children five or more times per week in 2020, up from 65% in 2018 and 64% in 2019.

Undoubtedly this is a good thing to emerge from the pandemic. The fact that many children were forced to learn remotely and many parents worked from home facilitated this change. Now that most children have returned to in-person classes, it will be interesting to see how this affects the amount of quality time parents spend with their children. It will also be interesting to see, perhaps several years from now, all the ways the pandemic has affected families and children.

The survey also found that parents’ outings with children decreased, probably because of the lockdown closings of restaurants, museums and other venues and pandemic-related travel restrictions. That said, many parents learned during the pandemic that quality time isn’t limited to going to a baseball game or museum. It can be found at home, free of charge.

The pandemic has caused many to re-prioritize what is important in their lives. And many companies have taken note — increasingly offering work-from-home options that weren’t available before the pandemic.

Of course, for many workers, especially those in critical service jobs such as first responders, working remotely has never been and never will be an option. And as often is the case, those at the lower financial rungs of society were strained the most during the pandemic. Many were unable to work remotely and many couldn’t find employment. Obviously, these workers did not have extra time to read to their children. The question of how to make quality time more equitable is one that we will have to address, but at least a light is now being shined on it.

As for the others, some companies can give employees the option of working from home when feasible, which is vital for parents looking to increase time with their children. Lawmakers should also address this where appropriate in order to make sure both fathers and mothers are afforded the same opportunities.

And parents should continue to do all they can to ensure that spending quality time with their children continues long after the pandemic is over.

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