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Who do adolescents spend their time with?

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As children leave childhood and enter adolescence, the amount of time spent with family members declines and the amount of time spent alone increases (Larson & Richards, 1991; Larson & Verma, 1999). There are also notable shifts in parent-child relationships as adolescents' own independence and relationships with peers become more central to their lives (Hill, Bromell, Tyson, & Flint, 2007; Steinberg & Silk, 2002).

This chapter explores who children in the LSAC K cohort spent their time with at ages 10–11, 12–13 and 14–15, based on children's self-reported time use diaries. These time use patterns are examined for boys and girls by age. Differences in time use according to family structure and parental employment are also explored. Family time is generally a positive influence on children and adolescents (Crouter, Head, McHale, & Tucker, 2004; Offer, 2013a). These time use patterns provide insights on the lives of adolescents and highlight circumstances in which they may have more limited opportunities for such time.

Box 4.1: Time use diaries

Study children were asked to complete a time use diary for the day before the home visit for the main LSAC interview, filling out details of their activities in a paper diary. They were instructed to record their activities, in sequence, from when they woke up to when they went to sleep at night. Activities were described in words (e.g. eating, watching TV, personal care), and start and end times of each activity were recorded. The diaries also captured information from children about who was present (i.e. in the same room) for each activity, except for during school lessons and during personal care activities such as bathing and dressing.

During the home visit, interviewers went through the diaries with children to check the quality of the diary data, enter the data into a computer, and classify main and secondary activities and other information.

Time use diaries were completed by the majority of children in responding families (96% in Wave 4, 92% in Wave 5 and 87% in Wave 6).

For further details about the LSAC time use diaries, refer to Corey, Gallagher, Davis, and Marquardt (2014).

4.1 Overview of who adolescents spend time with

The LSAC data show that the amount of time young people spend with their parents declines substantially between the ages of 10–11 and 14–15 (Figure 4.1, page 27). When study children were aged 10–11, the average amount of time spent with parents was 2.6 hours per day on weekdays and 5.4 hours per day on weekends. By age 14–15, this had dropped to 2.2 hours on weekdays and 4.3 hours on weekends.

Time spent with siblings (without parents present) also declined with age, from 2.8 hours per day on weekdays and 5.9 hours per day on weekends at age 10–11 to only 1.8 hours per day on weekdays and 3.4 hours per day on weekends at age 14–15.

Box 4.2: Who adolescents spend their time with

The time use diary data were used to estimate the number of minutes per day study children spent:

- with parents (Most children live with their biological parents but this can also include time spent with a step-parent or a parent living elsewhere. People other than parents may also be present.)
- with their siblings (without parents present)
- with other adults (without parents or siblings present, and not at school)
- at school
- with other children (without parents or siblings, and not at school or with other adults)
- alone.

Note that time without adults present (with siblings, other children or alone) does not necessarily mean that children are unsupervised. For example, when adolescents report being alone at home, this will include time spent in their bedroom with parents or others elsewhere in the house.

For this chapter, categories were created so they added to children's total awake time, without double counting any of the time. It should be noted that children are awake for longer as they increase in age from 10–11 years (a little under 14 and a half hours) to 12–13 years (a little over 14 and a half hours) to 14–15 years (15 hours).

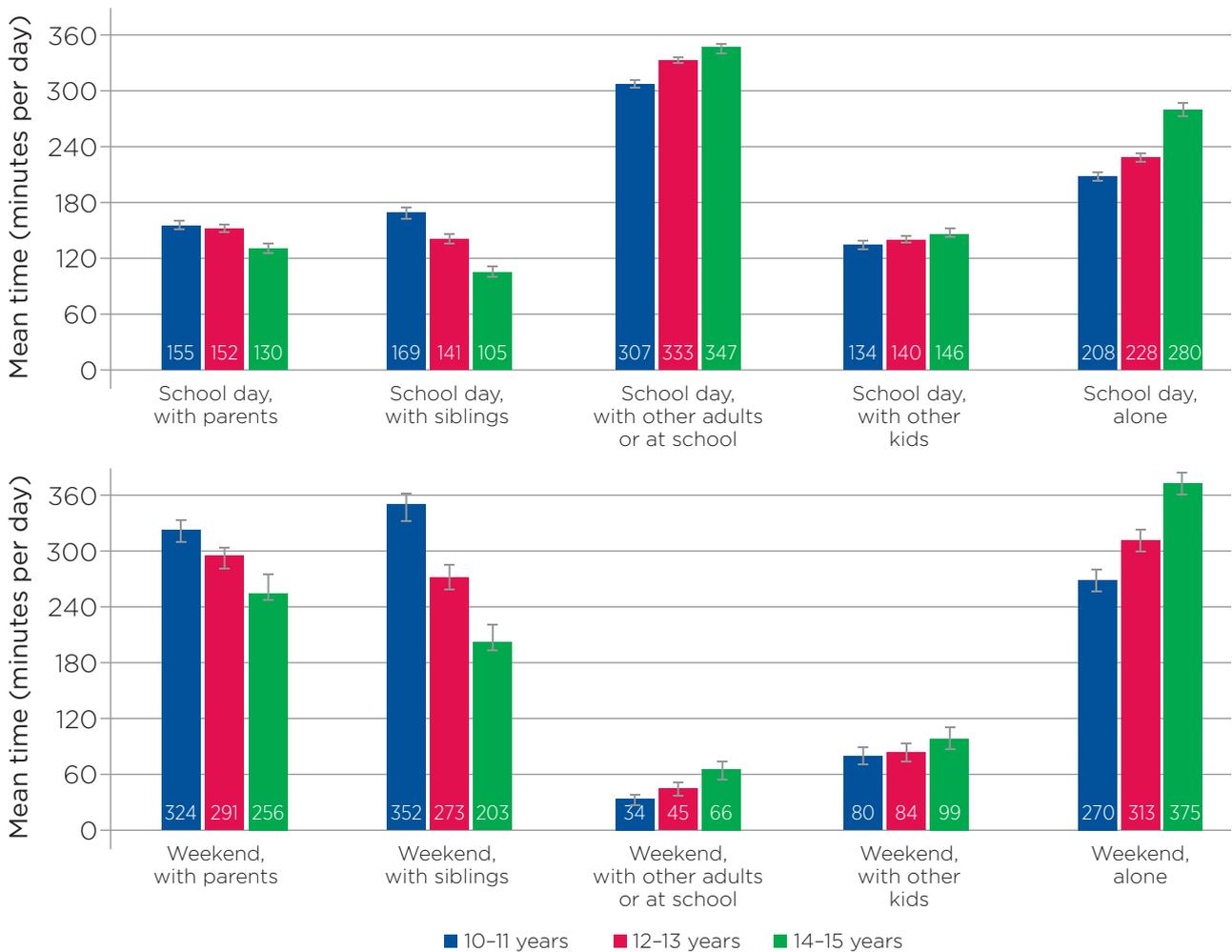
Compared to 10–11 year olds, 12–13 and 14–15 year olds spent around half an hour more per day at *school*.

Time with *non-parental adults* includes time in child care and doing extracurricular activities. It does not vary much by age on school days but increases with age on weekends.

The amount of time children spent *with children who are not siblings* (outside of time at school, with other adults or with their parents or siblings) actually changes very little over these ages. At age 10–11, the average amount of time spent with other children is 2.2 hours per day on weekdays and 1.3 hours per day on weekends. By age 14–15, the average time spent with other children is only 12 minutes more on weekdays and 19 minutes more on weekends.

On school days and weekend days, there is a significant increase in the amount of time children *spend alone*. On average, 10–11 year olds spent 3.5 hours alone on weekdays and 4.5 hours alone on weekends. At age 14–15, the average amount of time spent alone was 4.7 hours per day on weekdays and 6.3 hours per day on weekends.



Figure 4.1: Who children spend time with at 10–11, 12–13 and 14–15 years

Notes: Weekday diaries are excluded if children did not attend school on that diary day. Wave 4: $n = 2,089$ for school-day diaries and 815 for weekend diaries. Wave 5: $n = 1,958$ for school-day diaries and 740 for weekend diaries. Wave 6: $n = 1,430$ for school-day diaries and 651 for weekend diaries.

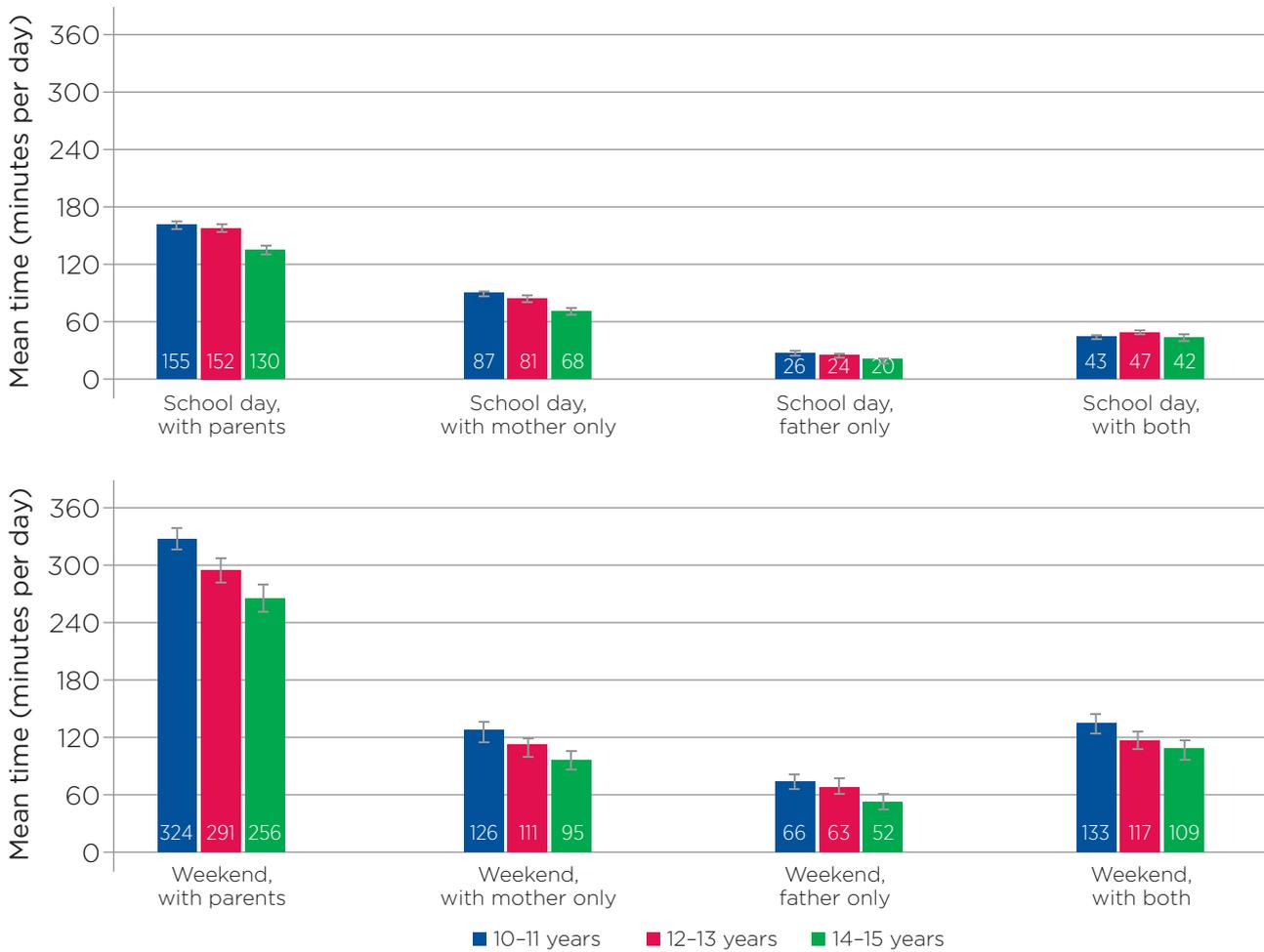
Source: LSAC Waves 4–6, K cohort, weighted

4.2 Time spent with parents

Time use research shows that, on average, children of varied ages spend more time with their mothers than their fathers (e.g. Baxter, 2015; Bryant & Zick, 1996; Craig, 2006). In Australia, this is at least partly explained by mothers spending fewer hours in paid work than fathers. It is therefore expected that in looking at who teens spend their time with, time with mothers will be greater than time with fathers (Dubas & Gerris, 2002; Offer, 2013b). The LSAC data confirm that adolescents spent considerably more time with their mother than with their father, particularly on weekdays (Figure 4.2, page 28).

- On school days, much of children's time with parents was time with only their mother. Smaller amounts of time were spent with both parents together and smaller amounts again with only their father. For school days, it was time with only mother that declined with age, more so than other types of parent time.
- Compared to school days, children spend more time on weekend days with parents overall. This corresponds to greater amounts of time in any of the parent categories – mother only, father only or both parents together.

Figure 4.2: Amount of time children spend with mothers and fathers at 10–11, 12–13 and 14–15 years



Notes: Weekday diaries are excluded if children did not attend school on that diary day. *n* for school-day diaries: Wave 4 = 2,089; Wave 5 = 1,958; Wave 6 = 1,430. *n* for weekend diaries: Wave 4 = 816; Wave 5 = 740; Wave 6 = 651.

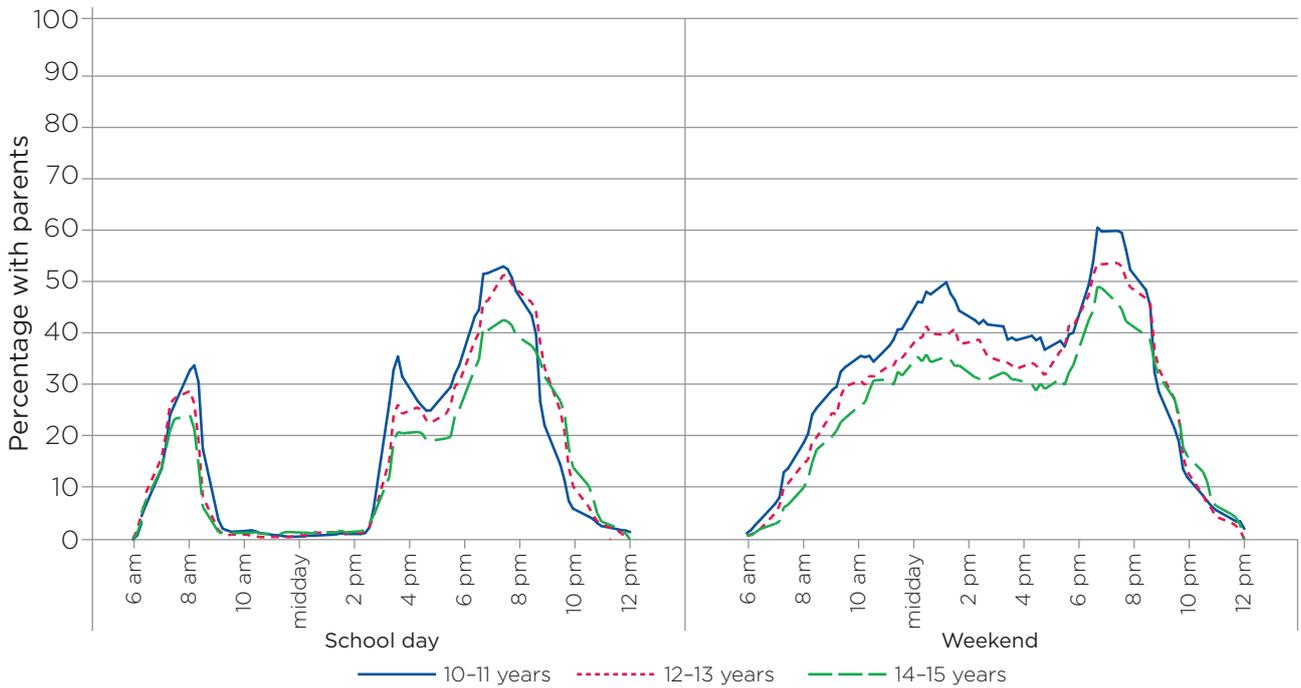
Source: LSAC Waves 4–6, K cohort, weighted

4.3 Who adolescents spend time with throughout the day

Additional insights about children’s time use can be gained by looking at the times that children are with different people, or alone, throughout the day. In terms of time spent with parents, the peak time for adolescents is around the time of the evening meal. For example, on school days, 52% of 10–11 year olds were with their parents between 7 pm and 7.15 pm, compared to 50% at 12–13 years and 42% at 14–15 years (Figure 4.3, page 29). Looking at a broader time frame, 82% of children at 10–11 years were with their parents at some time between 6 pm and 7.30 pm on school days, compared to 77% at 12–13 years and 69% at 14–15 years.

There was also a morning peak and an after-school peak on school days. However, the after-school peak disappeared for children at 12–13 and 14–15 years. This is likely to be a result of fewer parents picking their children up from school as children get older. On weekend days, there was still an evening peak but there was no morning peak. There was a gentler peak around lunchtime, with 30–40% of children with parents through the daytime hours. As children got older, the percentage who were with their parents declined at most times of day. The exception is the late evening hours, reflecting some older children staying up to a later time.

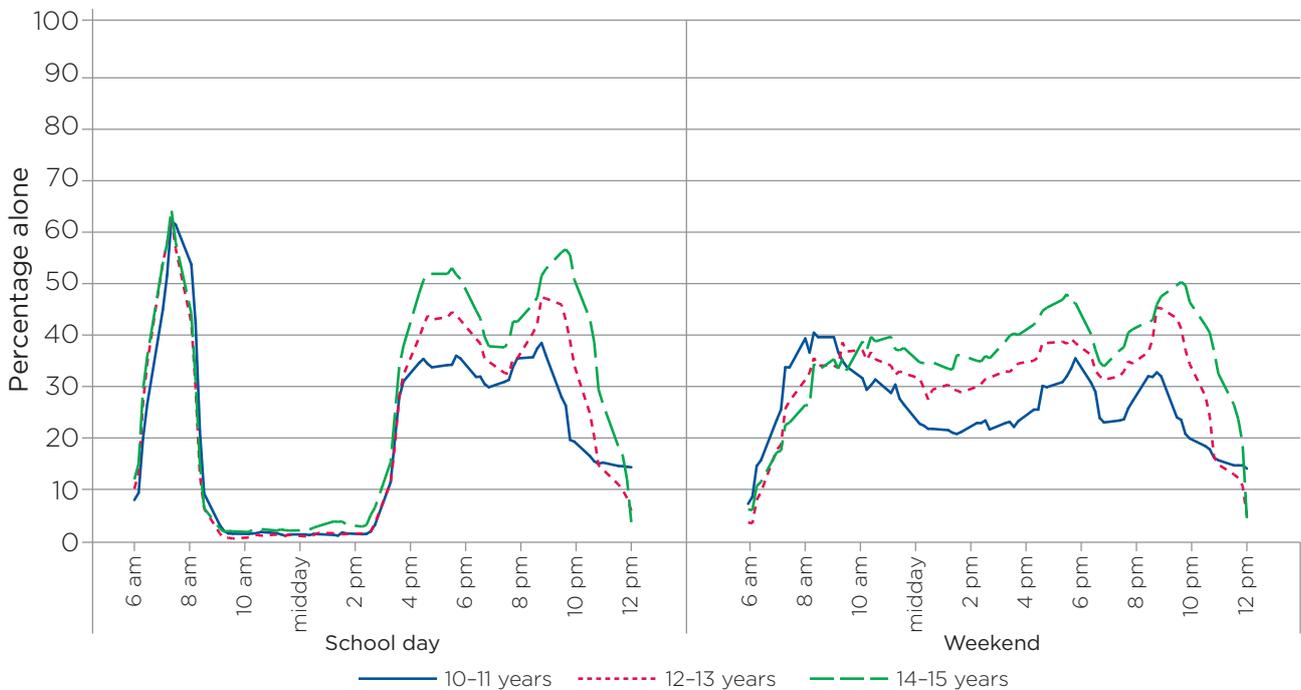
Figure 4.3: Percentage of children spending time with parents across the day



Notes: The diary data were aggregated into 15-minute blocks to allow derivation of whether parents were present at some time in each 15-minute period. Who children were with was only explored for times children were awake. Wave 4: $n = 2,089$ for school-day diaries and 816 for weekend diaries. Wave 5: $n = 1,958$ for school-day diaries and 740 for weekend diaries. Wave 6: $n = 1,430$ for school-day diaries and 651 for weekend diaries.

Source: LSAC Waves 4-6, K cohort, weighted

Figure 4.4: Percentage of children alone across the day



Notes: The diary data were aggregated into 15-minute blocks to allow derivation of whether parents were present at some time in each 15-minute period. Who children were with was only explored for times children were awake. Wave 4: $n = 2,089$ for school-day diaries and 816 for weekend diaries. Wave 5: $n = 1,958$ for school-day diaries and 740 for weekend diaries. Wave 6: $n = 1,430$ for school-day diaries and 651 for weekend diaries.

Source: LSAC Waves 4-6, K cohort, weighted

A significant change in children's time use as they get older is the increase in the time they spend alone. On weekends, at most times of the day, adolescents aged 14–15 years are more likely to be alone than they were at younger ages (Figure 4.4, page 29). On weekdays, it is the after school and evening times when children are increasingly spending time alone as they grow older.

4.4 Factors related to who adolescents spend time with

A range of factors contribute to adolescents spending different amounts of time with others or alone. As well as age differences, who children spend their time with is expected to vary for boys and girls. For example, some studies have found that girls spend significantly more time with their mothers than boys do, while boys spend more time with their fathers than girls do (see Dubas & Gerris, 2002).

Family composition is another key factor associated with who children spend time with. In particular, it is expected that children who live predominantly with one parent will spend less time with their other parent, with many spending no time with their other parent when measured through a one-day time diary.¹ Also, when children have siblings at home, they are likely to spend less time alone and more time with family. This may also spill over to children having less time with their parents, if those parents have to allocate some of their time to the siblings.

Parents' work hours are another important factor associated with the amount of time adolescents spend with their mothers and fathers (Bianchi, 2000; Craig, 2007; Nock & Kingston, 1988). While some studies have reported that children's time use does not vary with their mother's work hours (Bryant & Zick, 1996; Dubas & Gerris, 2002), previous findings for Australia using LSAC (Baxter, 2010, 2015) show that mothers' as well as fathers' work hours contribute to the variation in adolescents' time use.

For partnered parents, coordinating each person's work commitments with caring for children may mean that one parent spends more time with children when the other parent works longer hours, beyond any association between their own work hours and time with children. Internationally, findings about this are

mixed, with some studies finding no such association (Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean, & Hofferth, 2001) but others finding that fathers spend more time with children when the mother is employed (Baxter, 2015; Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001).

While links between parental employment and parent-child time are strongest for younger children, work hours may still be relevant to older children and young adolescents (Dubas & Gerris, 2002). Longer work hours by parents will reduce their availability to be at home and may result in children spending more time with siblings, non-family members or alone.

Estimates of the characteristics associated with who adolescents spend their time with, after accounting for the factors described above (Table 4.1, page 31), show that:

- As adolescents grew older, they spent more of their awake time alone. This increase in alone time was greater for boys than girls.
- Time spent either in school or with other adults increased with age but did not vary for boys and girls.
- At age 10–11, girls spent an average of 10 minutes per day less with their siblings compared to boys. As children grew older, they spent less time with their siblings. This decline in time with siblings was greater for boys than for girls.
- There were no significant differences in the average amount of time spent with other children, according to the age and gender of the study child.
- Compared to those who lived with two parents, there was no significant difference in the total amount of time that adolescents in single-parent households spent with at least one parent. However, those in single-father households spend somewhat more time in school (nine minutes more) and less time alone (39 minutes per day), compared to those who lived with two parents.
- The more co-resident siblings, the less time adolescents spent with their parents. Compared to those with no siblings, adolescents with two or more siblings spent an average of 31 minutes less per day with their parents, 12 fewer minutes with non-parental adults and 43 fewer minutes per day alone.

¹ Note that in these data, mothers and fathers could be step-parents. Some children classified as living with a single parent may also have another (non-parental) adult in the household (see Baxter (2017) for more information about complex families). The number of study children who live with their single father is quite small, and this is especially so among those completing a weekend diary. It is expected that children who live predominantly with one parent will spend less time with their other parent, with many spending no time with their other parent when measured through a one-day time diary.

Table 4.1: Factors associated with amount of time adolescents spend with their parents, other family members, other people and alone (variation in minutes per day)

	With parent(s)	With siblings (but not parents)	With non-parental adults	School	With other children (not at school)	Alone
Girls (ref. = boys)	-3	-10**	4	1	2	2
Child age (ref. = 10-11 years) ^a						
12-13 years	-6	-26***	1	10***	2	27***
14-15 years	-40***	-61***	14***	12***	3	105***
Household structure (ref. = two parents) ^b						
Single mother	-8	6	-2	2	1	0
Single father	-3	4	14	9*	11	-39**
Number of siblings (ref. = none)						
1	-17**	62***	-13***	-3	-10*	-16**
2+	-31***	103***	-12***	-4	-9	-43***
Mothers' work hours (ref. = not employed) ^c						
1-14	6	-3	0	4	2	-9
15-24	-7	-2	2	3	14***	-13*
25-34	-9	0	9**	4*	15***	-21***
35+	-14**	-2	9***	3*	16***	-10*
Fathers' work hours (ref. = not employed) ^c						
1-34	2	-9	0	4	0	10
35-44	0	-4	-2	3	-3	4
45-54	1	-8	-1	5*	4	-5
55+	9	-2	3	5*	-4	-10

Notes: $n = 10,699$ observations for 4,203 children. Linear regression, * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Data for weekdays and weekends were pooled, and an indicator for 'type of diary day', which captures whether the diary relates to a school day, a weekend day or a weekday that is not a school day, was included in the model. ^a Additional gender/age interaction terms are included to test whether differences in time use by age were different for boys and girls. ^b The household structure measure included an 'other' category, not shown in the table. ^c Two parental employment variables are included, one for mothers' work hours and one for fathers' work hours. Each has a category for 'not present', to allow for families in which children live only with one parent. Different hours groupings are used for mothers versus fathers given the very different distributions of their work hours.

Source: LSAC Waves 4-6, K cohort, weighted

In terms of parents' working hours:

- Mothers' and fathers' work hours do not have a major impact on the total amount of time that adolescents spend with their parents. The only significant difference was that adolescents spent an average of 14 minutes less per day with their parents if their mother worked full-time hours, rather than being not employed.
- After accounting for other factors, there was no significant association between fathers' working hours, and the amount of time that adolescents spent with their parents, siblings, with others or alone.
- There was no association between mothers' work hours and the amount of time that adolescents spent with their siblings. However, when mothers worked 25 hours or more per week, adolescents did spend longer with other adults (nine minutes more per day), compared to those whose mothers were not employed. Similarly, if mothers worked 15 hours or more per week, adolescents spent more time with other children (around 15 minutes more per day) compared to children with not-employed mothers. Adolescents' alone time was also associated with mothers' work hours. Adolescents had less time alone when mothers worked 15 or more hours per week, compared to those with mothers who were not employed.

4.5 Differences in time spent with mother and father

While there was little difference in the amount of time that children spent with their parents overall, according to household structure and parents working hours, there were significant differences in the amount of time that children spent with just their father, or just their mother, and with both parents (Table 4.2):

- As would be expected, compared to children living with two parents, those living with a single mother spent significantly less time with their father, and those living with a single father spent significantly less time with their mother.
- Children in single-father families spent significantly more time in total with their father than those in two-parent households, balancing out much of the lost time with their mother.
- Compared to adolescents in two-parent families, children in single-mother families spent only a little more time with their mother but they spent less time in total with their father. This meant they spent more time with only their mother, and less time with only their father or with both parents, compared to adolescents in two-parent families.
- The amount of time that adolescents spend with only their mother and only their father varies with different parental work hours, with adolescents whose mothers worked longer hours spending less time with only their mother and more time with only their father. However, increases in mothers' work hours are not related to differences in the amount of time adolescents spend with both parents together.

Table 4.2: Factors associated with amount of time spent with parents (minutes per day)

	With mother only	With father only	With both parents	Total with mother	Total with father	Total with parents
Girls (ref. = boys)	17***	-14***	-5	11*	-20***	-3
Child age (ref. = 10-11 years) ^a						
12-13 years	-8*	-1	3	-5	2	-6
14-15 years	-30***	-8**	-2	-32***	-10*	-40***
Household structure (ref. = two parents) ^b						
Single mother	100***	-24***	-85***	16*	-109***	-8
Single father	-67***	146***	-81***	-148***	65***	-3
Number of siblings (ref. = none)						
1	-9	-4	-4	-13**	-8	-17**
2+	-13**	-7*	-10**	-24***	-18***	-31***
Mothers' work hours (ref. = not employed) ^c						
1-14	-1	7*	1	0	7	6
15-24	-14***	6*	1	-14***	7	-7
25-34	-17***	10**	-2	-19***	8	-9
35+	-26***	14***	-1	-27***	12*	-14**
Fathers' work hours (ref. = not employed) ^c						
1-34	16*	-1	-13*	3	-14*	2
35-44	19***	-11***	-7	12	-18**	0
45-54	28***	-15***	-12*	16*	-27***	1
55+	34***	-13***	-12*	23***	-25***	9

Notes: $n = 10,699$ observations for 4,203 children. Linear regression, * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Data for weekdays and weekends were pooled, and an indicator for 'type of diary day', which captures whether the diary relates to a school day, a weekend day or a weekday that is not a school day, was included in the model. ^a Additional gender/age interaction terms are included to test whether differences in time use by age were different for boys and girls. ^b The household structure measure included an 'other' category, not shown in the table. ^c Two parental employment variables are included, one for mothers' work hours and one for fathers' work hours. Each has a category for 'not present', to allow for families in which children live only with one parent. Different hours groupings are used for mothers versus fathers given the very different distributions of their work hours.

Source: LSAC Waves 4-6, K cohort, weighted

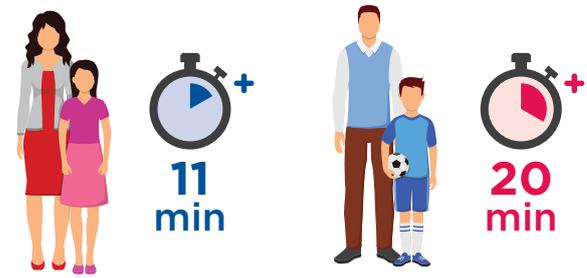
When fathers work long hours, we see no effect on the total amount of time that adolescents spend with their parents but they spend less time in total with their father, less time with him alone, and more time with only their mother. Compared to adolescents whose father was not employed, those with employed fathers spent a bit less time with both parents together. Having a father who worked long hours did not seem to affect the amount of time adolescents spent with both parents together.

There were also some differences in the amount of time that adolescents spent with only their mother, or only their father, according to the gender of the study child:

- On average, girls spent 11 minutes more per day with their mothers than boys did, while compared to girls, boys spent 20 minutes more per day, on average, with their fathers. This related to differences in time spent with those parents alone, with girls spending 17 more minutes per day with only their mother compared to boys, and boys spending 14 minutes more per day with only their father compared to girls (Figure 4.5).
- There were few statistically significant differences in children's time with parents when comparing their time at 12–13 years to their time at 10–11 years. However, at age 14–15, adolescents were spending significantly less time with their parents than they did at age 10–11. This had the greatest effect on time with their mother, as younger children tend to spend a considerable amount of their non-school time with their mother.
- The decline in the amount of time that adolescents spent with their mother, and in the overall amount of time with parents, between 10–11 years and 14–15 years was greater for boys than for girls.



Figure 4.5: Time adolescents spent with only their mother, or only their father



Daughters spent **11 minutes more** per day* with their **mothers** than did sons

Sons spent **20 minutes more** per day* with their **fathers** than did daughters

*on average

Summary

Using time use diaries, collected at ages 10–11, 12–13 and 14–15, this chapter provides new information about who adolescents spend their time with at different times of the day. Overall, the amount of time that adolescents spend with their parents declined as they grew from 10–11 and 12–13 years to 14–15 years. Balancing this decline in parental time, the main change was that children were spending more time alone.

At all ages, children spend more time with their mothers than with their fathers, and they were more likely to be with their mother alone, rather than with their father alone.

Girls spent more time than boys with only their mother and likewise boys spent more time than girls with only their father. These gendered patterns did not vary significantly across the ages of children explored here. However, the total amount of time children spent with their mothers did vary somewhat for boys and girls, in that both boys and girls spent a significantly lower amount of time with their mothers at age 14–15 years compared to 10–11 years.

Time with parents was related to family characteristics, including household structure and number of siblings. However, compared to children living with both parents, children in single-parent families did not have a large deficit in the total amount of time they spent with their parents, although they tended to have little time in which both parents were present.

When mothers worked longer hours, children spent less time with their mother and a little longer with their father. Similarly, when fathers worked longer hours, children spent less time with their father and more time with their mother. Maternal employment was also associated with children spending more time with non-family members. However, fathers' work hours were not associated with different amounts of total parental time, time spent with others or time spent alone.

As children grew older, the amount of time they spent alone increased substantially. This finding is consistent with previous research on children's time use (Larson, Richards, Moneta, Holmbeck, & Duckett, 1996). This was partly related to children spending more time awake in the evening but it was also related to their being more often alone throughout the day. On average, children who lived with their father and not their mother, those with more siblings, and those whose mother worked longer part-time hours spent less time alone.

At age 14–15, children spent more time in school or with other adults compared to when they were aged 10–11 and 12–13. However, we did not find that children were increasingly spending time only with other children. It was expected that they might spend more time with peers as they grew older, and the lack of evidence of this occurring perhaps suggests that these increases will happen as children grow older again and have more independence from their parents. It is possible also that access to social media and online communication is facilitating these young adolescents to spend time with their peers in different ways to that of adolescents of previous generations.

The time use diaries capture much more detail than has been used here, and in future analysis, the children's activities and locations can also be incorporated. This will strengthen this work, in particular for the examination of children's time alone and with other children, to explore what it is that children are doing at these times.

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