



Changes in Children's Well-Being and Family Environments

by Sharon Vandivere, Megan Gallagher, and Kristin Anderson Moore, *Child Trends* No. 18

Two contrasting patterns in children's well-being and their family environments emerged between 1999 and 2002: School-age children became strikingly less engaged in their schoolwork, while toddlers and preschoolers became somewhat more likely to be read to and told stories by their parents. Evidence also points to small declines in other activities outside the home. The share of children with parents who never volunteered or attended religious services increased slightly between 1999 and 2002. Elementary school children's participation in extracurricular activities declined during the same period, and toddlers and preschoolers in higher-income families were somewhat less likely to be taken on outings between 1999 and 2002.

While the data reveal no significant changes in children's health status or parents' mental health, some small setbacks among children in higher-income families were reported: Behavioral and emotional problems worsened among 6- to 17-year-olds, and parental aggravation became more common among parents of children under age 18. In contrast, behavioral and emotional problems became less pervasive among teens in low-income families.

The past few years have posed challenges to families raising children, with a faltering economy, terrorism, and new public policies altering the national landscape. With such factors in mind, this Snapshot uses data from the 1997, 1999, and 2002 rounds of the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF) to determine whether the well-being and behavior of children and their family environments changed from the late 1990s to 2002.¹ Since children in families with low incomes (less than 200 percent of the federal poverty thresholds) are at greater risk of poor cognitive, health, and social outcomes

than children in families with higher incomes (Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 1997), this Snapshot pays particular attention to children in low-income families.

Reading and Storytelling, Engagement in School

Between 1997 and 2002, children ages 1 to 5 became more likely to participate in a cognitively stimulating, shared activity with their parents. Specifically, infrequent reading or telling stories (fewer than three times per week) decreased among toddlers and preschoolers, from 16.9 percent in 1997 to 14.1 percent in 2002 (table 1).

In contrast, the percentage of children who were highly engaged in school declined.² Children's engagement in school was measured by asking parents four questions, including how often their child "cares about doing well in school," "only works on schoolwork when forced to," "does just enough schoolwork to get by," and "always does homework." Among 6- to 11-year-olds, the percentage who had a high level of engagement in school dropped from 43.1 in 1997 to 34.7 in 2002 (table 2). For 12- to

17-year-olds, the percentage declined from 38.2 to 30.9. The deterioration in school engagement and the improvement in reading and storytelling occurred among children in both low- and higher-income families and were concentrated in the period between 1999 and 2002.³

Activities Outside the Home

Children under age 18 became slightly less likely to have parents involved in activities outside the home during the period studied.⁴

DATA AT A GLANCE

AMONG 6- TO 11-YEAR-OLDS, SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT DECLINED FROM 43 PERCENT IN 1997 TO 35 PERCENT IN 2002.

SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT DECLINED FOR 12- TO 17-YEAR-OLDS FROM 38 TO 31 PERCENT BETWEEN 1997 AND 2002.

THE SHARE OF YOUNG CHILDREN WHOSE PARENTS READ OR TOLD STORIES TO THEM INFREQUENTLY DROPPED FROM 17 TO 14 PERCENT.



Between 1997 and 2002, children became slightly more likely to have a parent reporting no volunteering or religious services attendance (table 1). These changes took place in both income groups, primarily between 1999 and 2002.⁵

Participation in extracurricular activities declined among 6- to 11-year-olds, with a small drop (from 90.9 percent to 88.7 percent) between 1999 and 2002 for those in higher-income families and a more substantial drop (from 72.0 percent to 63.8 percent) between 1997 and 2002 for those in low-income families. No significant change occurred in 12- to 17-year-olds' involvement in extracurricular activities (table 2). The percentage of toddlers and preschoolers taken on outings at least once a day declined between 1999 and 2002 in low-income families.⁶ However, this decline followed an increase in outings between 1997 and 1999, resulting in no overall change between 1997 and 2002 (table 1).

Behavioral and Emotional Problems, Parental Aggravation

Behavioral and emotional problems increased among children in higher-income families between 1997 and 2002. The percentage of 6- to 11-year-olds with a high level of behavioral and emotional problems increased from 4.3 to 5.8, while the percentage of 12- to 17-year-olds with such problems rose from 5.2 to 7.0 (table 2). In addition, the percentage of children in higher-income families living with a highly aggravated parent increased from 5.6 to 8.6 (table 1). Aggravated parents are those who reported, for example, that their children “are much harder to care for than most” or “do things that bother them a lot.”

In contrast, low-income families saw a decline in the percentage of 12- to 17-year-olds with a high level of behavioral and emotional problems (from 14.9 to 11.1) and no increase in parental aggravation.

Children's behavioral and emotional problems and parents' aggravation are interrelated, so it is not surprising to see parallel changes in these indicators. On the one hand, children who act out or behave immaturely can cause aggravation. On the other hand, when adults feel aggravated, their parenting skills may deteriorate, which could negatively affect children. Another possibility is that highly aggravated parents are more likely to interpret a given behavior as annoying or troublesome.

Child Well-Being by Family Income

Despite the increases in children's behavioral and emotional problems and parents' aggravation in higher-income families, the NSAF shows ongoing gaps between the well-being of children in low-income and higher-income families. These gaps persist over time and across age groups for most of the indicators of child and family well-being discussed here. For example, in 2002, children under age 18 in low-income families were more than twice as likely as their counterparts in higher-income families to have a parent reporting symptoms of poor mental health (25.8 percent versus 11.0 percent; see table 1). Also, low-income children were about three times as likely as higher-income children to be in fair or poor health themselves (table 2).

Table 1. Family Environment of Children under Age 18, by Family Income (percent)

Year	All Incomes	Low-Income ^a	Higher-Income ^a
Children read to or told stories fewer than 3 days per week (ages 1–5)			
1997	16.9	24.2	10.5
1999	17.9	24.3	12.8*
2002	14.1**	20.1**	9.9†
Children taken on outings at least once a day (ages 1–5)			
1997	23.7	19.3	27.6
1999	25.8*	23.1*	27.9
2002	23.5†	17.7†	27.5
Children with parent who never volunteers			
1997	28.0	39.3	19.4
1999	28.4	40.0	20.5
2002	30.2**	41.9*	23.1**
Children with parent who never attends religious services			
1997	16.4	20.7	13.1
1999	16.1	19.6	13.6
2002	17.8**	22.0†	15.3**
Children with parent who is highly aggravated			
1997	9.2	14.0	5.6
1999	10.0	13.9	7.3*
2002	10.4*	13.4	8.6**
Children with parent reporting symptoms of poor mental health			
1997	16.9	25.6	10.2
1999	15.9	24.4	10.1
2002	16.6	25.8	11.0

Sources: 1997, 1999, and 2002 National Survey of America's Families

^a Low-income is defined as below 200 percent of the federal poverty thresholds and higher-income as 200 percent of the federal poverty thresholds and above. All differences between income subgroups are significant at the 0.10 level.

* Difference from the 1997 percentage is significant at the 0.10 level.

† Difference from the 1999 percentage is significant at the 0.10 level.

The single exception to the pattern is accidents and injuries. Among 6- to 11-year-olds and 12- to 17-year-olds in 2002, children in higher-income families were slightly more likely to have been injured or to have had an accident than children in low-income families (table 2).⁷ For children under age 6, the percentages did not differ significantly by family income (data not shown). Because the incidence of accidents and injuries was not included in the 1997 or 1999 survey, it is impossible to know whether this indicator has changed over time.

Discussion

Most indicators of child well-being and behavior and of family environment remained stable or declined between 1997 and 2002. Although it is not possible to pinpoint the causes of these

Table 2. Well-Being and Behavior of Children under Age 18, by Age and Family Income (percent)

Year	AGE 6–11			AGE 12–17		
	All Incomes	Low-Income ^a	Higher-Income ^a	All Incomes	Low-Income ^a	Higher-Income ^a
Accident or injury in the past 12 months^{b,c}						
2002	13.2	11.5	14.2	20.2	17.9	21.4
High level of engagement in school						
1997	43.1	37.9	47.2	38.2	29.6	43.5
1999	41.5	38.5	43.8*	38.4	34.0*	40.8
2002	34.7*†	30.1*†	37.6*†	30.9*†	22.8*†	35.1*†
Participated in extracurricular activities						
1997	82.3	72.0	90.2	83.7	73.9	90.0
1999	80.9	67.4*	90.9	83.0	72.2	89.0
2002	79.1*†	63.8*	88.7†	83.4	73.8	88.4
In fair or poor health^b						
1997	4.7	7.9	2.2	4.9	10.0	1.7
1999	4.1	6.8	2.1	5.8	10.3	3.2*
2002	5.1†	8.6	2.8	5.5	10.5	2.9*
High level of behavioral and emotional problems						
1997	6.6	9.5	4.3	8.9	14.9	5.2
1999	6.3	9.3	4.2	7.4*	10.4*	5.8
2002	7.0	9.1	5.8*†	8.4†	11.1*†	7.0*†

Sources: 1997, 1999, and 2002 National Survey of America's Families

^a Low-income is defined as below 200 percent of the federal poverty thresholds and higher-income as 200 percent of the federal poverty thresholds and above. All differences between income subgroups are significant at the 0.10 level.

^b Percentages for children age 0–5 are available from the authors.

^c New in the 2002 survey.

* Difference from the 1997 percentage is significant at the 0.10 level.

† Difference from the 1999 percentage is significant at the 0.10 level.

patterns (Moore and Brown 2003), it is worth noting that the past several years have been a tumultuous period for many families. Fears of domestic terrorism and highly publicized incidents of violence and child abduction have captured public attention. In addition, many families have become increasingly concerned about their financial security, and some have lost jobs. Stock values have declined precipitously, and repeated corporate scandals have discouraged the public. And, while rising housing values have benefited homeowners by increasing their home equity, the correspondingly high costs have prevented other families from buying a house, despite low interest rates.

State and local budget cuts have reduced or eliminated funding for a number of services benefiting children and families with children. At the same time, welfare reform and devolution have continued to unfold. The data suggest that, when examining measures of children's well-being and family environment, neither the hopes nor the fears of welfare reform have been realized. Most indicators examined in this Snapshot have remained stable or changed only slightly for children in low-income families.

The social, economic, and policy changes discussed here may offset each other. For example, the positive effects of new policies might be undercut by the faltering economy.

The contrasting findings of declines in school engagement among 6- to 17-year-olds and more frequent reading for preschool children are perplexing. Although no conclusions can be drawn from the data presented here, it is notable that the deterioration in school engagement among school-age children and the improvement in parents' reading and storytelling to young children occurred at the same time as an increased focus in schools on testing, accountability, and reform, as well as public education campaigns promoting the importance of early childhood development.

Continued monitoring will be necessary to see whether the changes described here represent significant shifts, the beginning of negative trends, normal fluctuations over time, or short-term dips tied to the economy. While data on poverty, births, deaths, unemployment, and family structure have been available for many years and have proved extremely helpful to policymakers and voters, this nation has only recently begun to monitor the well-being of children and families.

With a longer time frame, information on child and family well-being will similarly become part of how society monitors its progress.

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Endnotes

- ¹ The data presented here are adjusted using weights from the 2000 Census. Data from the 1997 and 1999 surveys, published elsewhere, were computed using weights from the 1990 Census. For more details about the indicators of well-being, behavior, and family environment, see Moore et al. (2000),

Vandivere, Moore, and Zaslow (2000), and Ehrle and Moore (1999). All differences described in this Snapshot are statistically significant at the 0.10 level.

- ² A recent report (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine of the National Academies 2003) addresses the importance of school engagement, particularly for disadvantaged students. Students have to be engaged in school to learn, graduate, and avoid limiting their opportunities later in life.
- ³ One small deviation from the pattern is that, among toddlers and preschoolers in higher-income families, the improvement in infrequent reading or telling stories between 1999 and 2002 followed a deterioration between 1997 and 1999, resulting in no overall change between 1997 and 2002. However, the percentage of toddlers and preschoolers who were read to or told stories frequently (six or more days per week) increased in both income groups. In addition, the percentages of children (in both income groups) who were poorly engaged in school increased. These patterns support the positive finding on reading and storytelling and the negative finding on school engagement.
- ⁴ Information on parental activities, as well as parental aggravation and mental health symptoms, was collected only about the adult in the household who was "most knowledgeable" about the child. In about three-quarters of cases, this adult was the child's mother, and in the vast majority of cases, this adult was a parent. This Snapshot refers to the most knowledgeable adult as the child's parent.
- ⁵ No changes were observed in the percentage of children with parents who volunteered or attended religious services frequently (at least a few times a month).
- ⁶ No changes were observed in the percentage of children taken on outings infrequently (two to three times per month or fewer).
- ⁷ Parents answered the question, "During the past 12 months, has [CHILD] had any accidents or injuries that required medical attention?"

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SNAPSHOTS
of America's Families



Snapshots III presents findings from the 1997, 1999, and 2002 rounds of the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF). Information on more than 100,000 people was gathered from approximately 40,000 representative households in each round. The NSAF is part of the *Assessing the New Federalism* project (ANF). Information on ANF and the NSAF can be obtained at <http://www.urban.org/anf>.

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