

6 O'Clock Crash Hits Married Working Mothers Harder



A recent study at the U of I set out to learn how single working mothers of teens spend their time and how happy they are at different times of the day. The data were then compared with similar data collected in a previous study from mothers of teens in two-parent working households. The mothers and at least one child in the family who was in 5th to 8th grade wore a pager. The device beeped at random times throughout their waking hours. When it beeped, they wrote in a journal about the activity they were doing at the time and rated on a happiness scale how they were feeling.

"Surprisingly, although it would seem that single mothers would have less leisure time, we found that this wasn't true," said Reed Larson, professor of family ecology, human and community development at the University of Illinois. The study showed that these single mothers of adolescent children spend less time doing housework and are happier when they are at home.

Larson speculated that the reason for this is that the absence of a husband in the household lowers the expectations and does not dictate when housework needs to get done. Single mothers can do the housework whenever they feel like doing it and dinnertime can be more flexible and casual. "When there is no man in the home, I suspect that there may be lower expectations for immaculate cleanliness, elaborate meals, and other non-essential products of mothers' labor," he said.

Larson referred to this phenomenon as "doing gender." Like it or not, we are products of the family dynamics in which we were raised and those dynamics can result in people making seemingly subconscious decisions based on our experience with gender roles. This was evident in the happiness ratings from single working mothers. Larson said, "What is striking is that one-parent mothers' profile of emotional experience looks much like what we found for two-parent fathers. They were less happy at work and happier at home." He said that for single mothers the home is a place of relaxation, and comparative happiness — as it was for the two-parent fathers.

Married mothers come home from work to more work making dinner, helping with homework and doing housework.

The single mothers put in a hard day at their jobs, but appeared more able to relax and enjoy themselves when they came home — particularly during the 6 o'clock crash period.

Since shared family meals have been linked to higher well-being and fewer problem behaviors in teens, Larson's research also compared the times when the teens and parents both reported that they were eating. In the two-parent families, these shared meals occurred in the 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. time period.

In the one-parent families, shared meals were likely to occur any time between 4:30 and 8:30 pm. There was not a set time when supper occurred. They did not experience a 6 o'clock crash because they were not under pressure to get supper on the table by 6:00 p.m.

Larson said that the absence of a husband reduces the influence of gender on single mothers. "They may feel less bound to live up to magazine-cover images and standards of the normative American two-parent family — such as dinner on the table at 6:00. Without the presence of a husband and father who has to be catered to, things become more simple and flexible. And this flexibility may be especially suited to teenagers who are more autonomous, competent, and able to contribute to care for their own and family needs."

The study suggests that single-parent households may have a lot more going for them than many people would expect. Although some of them in the study were chaotic, for the most part, evenings were more relaxed than in two-parent households.

