

The Enjoyment Paradox: College-Educated Mothers Invest More in Their Children's Learning and Enjoy It Less

Based on BFI Working Paper No. 2026-83, "[*The Enjoyment Paradox: College-Educated Mothers Invest More in Their Children's Learning and Enjoy It Less*](#)," by Ariel Kalil, Haoxuan Liu, and Ritika Sethi, University of Chicago

College-educated mothers spend more time on learning activities with their children despite reporting substantially lower enjoyment of those activities. This enjoyment paradox is sharpest among non-employed, higher-income college-educated mothers.

Parents' investments in activities like reading, educational tasks, and learning-oriented conversation are [consequential inputs into early child development](#). College-educated parents devote substantially more time to these activities than less-educated parents, even though they tend to have less time available outside of paid work. Understanding why more-educated parents invest more time in their children's learning is a central question in the economics of the household.

In this paper, the authors examine a surprising feature of this pattern: college-educated mothers who invest more in their children's learning enjoy it less. They call this pattern the enjoyment paradox.

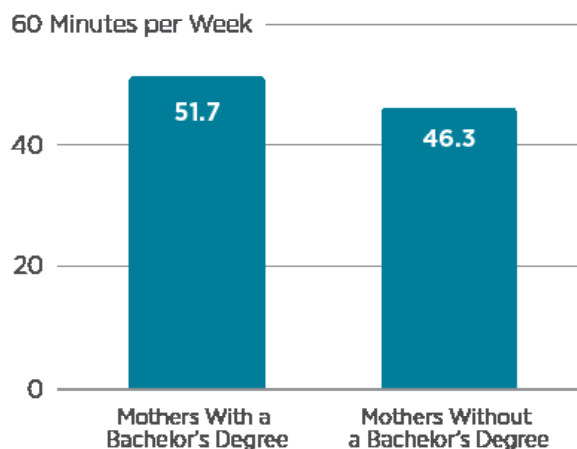
The authors use data from the Early Investment Project, a survey of roughly 2,000 caregivers of children enrolled in kindergarten in Chicago Public Schools during the 2021–22 school year. The survey measures mothers' weekly time spent on learning activities with their children, their enjoyment of those activities, their motivations for investing, and their well-being. The authors also examine how the relationship varies with household income and mothers' paid-employment status.

The authors find the following:

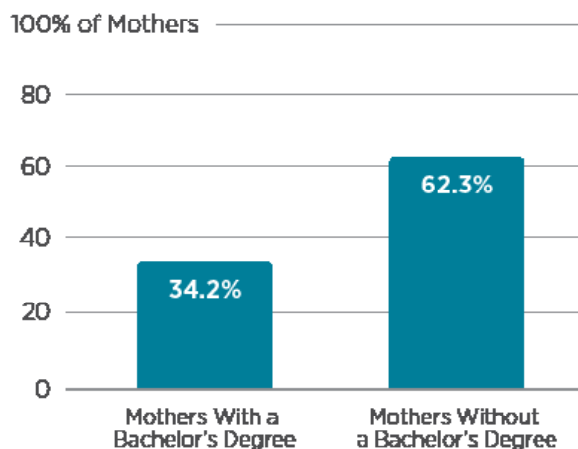
- **College-educated mothers invest more time in their children's learning, but enjoy these activities**

Figure 1 • College-Educated Mothers Invest More Time but Report Less Enjoyment in Children's Learning Activities

A) Time Spent on Learning Activities



B) Share Reporting Peak Enjoyment



Note: Time measures mothers' self-reported weekly minutes spent on learning activities with their children. Peak enjoyment is the share of mothers who rated their enjoyment of these activities 10 out of 10. The sample includes roughly 2,000 caregivers of kindergartners in Chicago Public Schools during the 2021–22 school year.

substantially less. College-educated mothers report spending 51.7 minutes per week on learning activities, compared with 46.3 minutes among mothers without a bachelor's degree. Yet they rate their enjoyment at 8.23 on a 0-10 scale, compared with 9.10 among less-educated mothers. College-educated mothers are also 28 percentage points less likely to give learning activities a peak enjoyment rating of 10.

- **Differences in demographics and psychological barriers do not explain the enjoyment paradox.** Accounting for mothers' age, race and ethnicity, single-parent status, growth mindset, **present bias**, anxiety, agency, and depression reduces the gap in peak enjoyment but does not eliminate it. After accounting for these differences, college-educated mothers remain 17.8 percentage points less likely to report peak enjoyment.
- **College-educated mothers' greater investment does not appear to be driven by greater enjoyment.** Within both education groups, mothers who enjoy learning activities more also spend more time on them. But among mothers who report the same level of enjoyment, the education gap in time grows from 2.5 to 3.2 minutes per week. In other words, college-educated mothers invest more despite enjoying these activities less.
- **Enjoyment is lowest among non-employed, higher-income, college-educated mothers.** Among mothers with above-median household income, non-employment cuts in opposite directions depending on education. College-educated mothers

who are not employed report lower enjoyment and spend less time on learning activities than employed college-educated mothers at the same income. Less-educated mothers who are not employed spend more time than their employed counterparts.

- **Among lower-income mothers, the pattern reverses.** For college-educated mothers with below-median household income, non-employment is instead associated with higher peak enjoyment, and the authors find no corresponding effect on time investment. The lower enjoyment associated with non-employment among college-educated mothers is therefore specific to the higher-income group.

The authors interpret these findings through research on intensive parenting, which emphasizes the strong expectations some parents face to invest substantial time, attention, and resources in their children's development. These expectations may be particularly strong for higher-income, college-educated mothers. Paid employment can provide another source of identity and accomplishment outside of parenting; without that professional role, expectations around children's development may weigh more heavily.

The results suggest that mothers can invest more in their children's learning even when they enjoy that time less. College-educated mothers may be motivated more by the expected benefits for their children and expectations around intensive parenting than by their own enjoyment. Understanding why these costs are greater for some mothers and whether they can be reduced is an important direction for future research.

present bias: the tendency to place greater weight on immediate rewards or costs than on future ones, even when waiting could produce a larger benefit

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