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The Strategic Involvement of Children in Housework: An Australian Case of Two-Income Families

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ABSTRACT

Two conflicting views emerged from the accounts of two-income parents about their children's participation in housework in an in-depth study conducted during 1991 in NSW, Australia. On the one hand, parents felt the need to socialise children through housework responsibilities and on the other hand their contribution was perceived essential due to a lack of resources. Parents strategically used discipline and, positive and negative reinforcement to integrate children in household division of labour. Parents assigned simple chores to the younger children, complex chores in the later years, and expected more advanced housework such as cooking family meals, lawn mowing, wood cutting, car washing, etc. from teenagers. Mother's time spent in the work-force increased children's task performance, especially girls, as they helped in twice as many tasks compared to boys. Even though parents believed that they should not pay children for housework they encouraged them to earn pocket money for chores such as tidying their own room, ironing, washing the family car, lawn mowing, etc. Children performed about 20 per cent of the household tasks and pitched-in when and where necessary.

Introduction

Dependent on class and cultural background childhood signifies a stage in an individual's life course associated with distinctive songs, toys, and privileges. To some extent childhood has been commercialised by the capitalist nature of Western culture. In this socially constructed care free life stage children are expected to grow up to be healthy and safe, and able to look back with pride. Zelizer (1985:209-223) suggested that changes in social conditions such as women's liberation movement, the advocacy of children's rights, and changes in family structures will require children's contribution in household work. Children have been found to make a significant contribution to the household task performance (Cogle and Tasker, 1982; Blair, 1992). Studies have also shown that children spent about 7 to 8.4 hours per week on housework (Sanik, 1981; Blair, 1992). Children were encouraged to participate in household chores from the young age of two (White and Brinkerhoff, 1981; Cogle and Tasker, 1982) and a majority had set chores to perform (Peters and Haldeman, 1987).

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Children have also been found to perform more housework when their mothers work outside the home (Hedges and Barnett, 1972). Recent Australian study by Burns and Homel (1989) have further shown that household task performance by children is gender based with boys involved in significantly more handyman tasks than girls. Goodnow and Burns (1985:47-51) found that in terms of the number and function of their jobs the country children are likely to have more jobs regarding the daily workings of their home environment. Another Australian study by Goodnow, Cashmore, Cotton, and Knight (1984:205) reported cultural differences in the age considered appropriate in assigning household tasks to children. They found although mothers in both cultures believed children should do household chores they differed on suitable time as Australian and Lebanese born mothers considered the ages of 5 and 6 and after the age of 7, respectively (Goodnow et al., 1984:205).

It is important to note that women’s participation in the labour force in the last twenty years has increased significantly. For example, current employment for married women in Australia has risen to 52.6 per cent (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1991). Earlier and recent research has shown that women prefer to combine motherhood and employment (Shehan, 1984), and still carry more of the housework responsibilities (Berardo et al., 1987; Bittman, 1991). It has been reported that a lack of time and energy for housework performance have led to the renegotiation of traditional gender roles between two-income parents and their children (Gill, 1993). However, it is unknown how the time spent on household chores by children affects their leisure and educational attainment.

This study explores children’s involvement in housework in two-income families from two factors: (a) socialisation theory and (b) the need for children’s help. The socialisation model refers to the learning of expectations, habits, skills, values, beliefs, and other requirements necessary for effective participation in social groups. At least until the onset of schooling, apart from day care and community contacts, the family is the entire social world of children and act as the agent of socialisation (Riley, Foner, and Waring, 1988:243-290). Parents’ schemata of child-rearing practices lead to their expectations of children’s behaviour in households (Goodnow, 1988).

Social psychologists suggest that children’s maturation takes place through expectation of privileges and acceptance of increasing responsibilities. Thrall (1978) found that both men and women consider and trust their childhood experiences in housework while forming their marital division of labour. The responsibilities may be in the form of chores appropriate to the child’s age. By sharing in family prosperity or hard times, the child becomes aware of the ‘bonds of reciprocity’ within the family, the community, and the outside world. It is also suggested that coparticipation of children and adults in household division of labour leads to increased solidarity (White and Brinkerhoff, 1981).