

INSIGHTS

Spending time with kids: How much is enough?



The need to spend time with their parents differs for different kids. For some, there's no end to the time they'd spend with you. However, other kids feel differently. There's no right answer.

I'm fortunate to have the flexibility that allows me to spend a great deal of time with my children. However, my nine year old daughter wants to spend more time with me. My eleven year old son, on the other hand, is content either way.

Australia ranks first

According to a recent study Australian parents rank number one among OECD countries (including most of Europe, North America, the UK and Finland) when it comes to spending time with their kids. The lion's share of this time is still invested by mums, but Australian dads are ahead of those from many other countries, averaging around 70 minutes a day with their children.

The source of misplaced parental guilt

According to research published in the Journal of Marriage and Family, not spending enough time with children is the biggest source of parental guilt in Australia.

The researchers also found that it's quality, not quantity of time children spend with parents that's important for their emotional wellbeing, achievement and behaviour for kids aged 3-11 years. The researchers concluded that volume of time doesn't matter. It's much more important how time is spent with your children when you are together. This in no way advocates for absentee parenting. It's about making the most of the family time you have and reducing feelings of stress for you if you can't be around as much as you'd like to be.

Here are some ideas to help make sure you optimise the time you spend with your kids:

- Create a tradition of one-on-one time with each of your kids around an activity that you both enjoy, such as a cafe catch up over a milkshake, shooting hoops or playing a favourite board game
- Read regularly to each other, as these are special times of connection, especially in bed at night
- Eat meals together as a family so you can all catch up and connect – this is worth its weight in gold when it comes to quality time
- Pay attention to your children, watching for cues that they're in need of extra time with you
- Adolescents benefit from spending extra time with their parents. Through interactions with their parents teenagers can learn to make better decisions about their health, improve their academic achievement and experience better wellbeing
- Take an interest in their interests. Connect with your children through the activities that they value such as music, sport or games, even if they aren't hobbies you don't normally enjoy. Your kids will appreciate you making the effort and will respond accordingly
- Be present when you're with your kids. Research shows our minds can wander up to 47% of the time when we are with our loved ones. If you're present with our kids, you won't miss out on nearly half of that precious time.

Be mindful of the importance of unstructured time for kids. That is, time they spend playing alone or with siblings and friends. Play is essential for our kids' wellbeing and development. Play changes as our kids grow up but as long as whatever they're doing is child-led, it's play. This is the time to leave them to it.



Dr Jodi Richardson

Dr Jodi Richardson is a mental health and wellbeing educator and author. She has developed her expertise over two decades of professional work in teaching, wellbeing, clinical practice and elite sport, including working for Beyond Blue on the national schools-based initiative for the prevention of depression. Dr Jodi completed a PhD in Physiology, a Bachelor of Applied Science with Honours, and a Bachelor of Education. She is co-author of the highly acclaimed book *Anxious Kids*.