

Working Families' Engagement in Children's Activities: Views from Italian and American Families

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Working Paper No 62

2006

This study is part of an interdisciplinary, collaborative research endeavor conducted by members of the UCLA Center on Everyday Lives of Families (CELf) under the direction of Elinor Ochs, and The Italian Center on Everyday Lives of Families (iCELf) under the direction of Clotilde Pontecorvo. Both CELf and iCELf are generously supported by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation program on the Workplace, Workforce, and Working Families, headed by Kathleen Christensen. The authors are grateful to Johanna Romero and Manuela Oliva for their assistance in coding the data. The authors are also indebted to the working families who participated in this study for opening their homes and sharing their lives.

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ABSTRACT

In the United States and Italy there has been an increase in children's after school activities, also called extra-curricular activities. Research in the U.S. has shown that middle class parents often view such activities as promoting the development of skills and traits that help ensure both well-being and future educational and personal success for their children. In this paper, we compare children's involvement in after-school activities in the U.S. and Italy focusing on 1) the nature and amount of extra-curricular activity families organize for their children; and 2) the meanings parents attribute to their children's engagement in activity. We find that U.S. and Italian children spend similar amount of time on similar activities after school and that their parents share the views that these activities socialize their children's to important values and traits. Finally, we propose that these similarities are a manifestation of an increasingly shared middle-class ideologies and views on childhood in the two cultural contexts.

The achievement of well-being is part of the cultural project of development. It is produced by effective, innovative, competent participation in the activities and routines deemed desirable by a cultural community (Weisner 1998:70-71).

In recent years there has been a marked increase in children's extra-curricular activities both in the U.S. (Dunn et al. 2003) and in Italy (ISTAT 2005). This increase seems to be related to a different approach toward leisure and 'free time' of children or, more generally, of individuals.; leisure is expected to be purposeful "recreation", a set of activities whose function is to improve one's life, such as one's relationships, health, skills and more (Gillis 2001, Shaw & Dawson 2001; Gutierrez et al. 2005).). In general, there is a shift from pleasure activity to learning activity, or at least a blurring of two (Bachner & Fuhs, 2001).

In light of the similar increase in children's extra-curricular activities in both the U.S. and Italy, yet the different discourses in those countries regarding the benefits and concerns associated with children's participation in such activities, it seems valuable to take an on-the-ground view of families engagement in extra-curricular activities, and explore their motivations for and attitude toward participating in such activities. To this end, this paper will compare the types of activities and the time that families dedicate to extra-curricular activities in both countries, as well as examine the meanings that U.S. and Italian parents' attribute to their children's engagement in these activities.

Extra-Curricular Activities in Everyday Practice

In the United States, leisure time activities most often becomes associated with education or sports related activities, as well as with middle class working parents' beliefs that such activities promote the development of skills or traits that help ensure children's well-being and future educational and personal success (Dunn, Kinney, & Hofferth, 2003). Comparative studies on children's and adolescents' use of time in different nations show that both sport and nonsport forms of structured leisure (such as arts, hobbies, and organizations) account for a large amount of the free time in European countries and US (Larson and Verma 1999). These studies also document specific cultural patterns such as the higher percentage of time spent in sport by US adolescents compared to Italian adolescents (Massimini et al. 1986). In postindustrial societies, engaging children in extra-curricular activities offers a preferred alternative to leaving children's time open and unscheduled (Larson & Verma 1999). Children's extra-curricular activities have been linked to academic achievement and social adjustment (Eccles et al. 2003). Further, with the rising rates of obesity among children, there is an increased emphasis on the benefit of children's involvement in athletic activities (Andersen et al. 1998, Goran et al. 1999). Other studies in the field of the psychology of wellbeing (Argyle 1987) have also explored college and high school students' perception of so-called 'optimal experience' (Delle Fave, Massimini 2005) and found that optimal experience was consistently

prominent in sport and hobby, less frequent during productive (e.g., homework, work) activity.

Authors emphasize that, especially for preadolescents, parents' participation and material support to the child's practice (in, specifically, sports) plays a central role in promoting and maintaining the child's engagement in the activity (Pietrantonio, Ria 2001). Parents are willing to spend much time driving them to activities, attending games and competitions, and volunteering often in different capacities within the different organizations (as coaches, assistant coaches, team moms etc.). Weisner (1998) argues that families engage in meaningful activities for themselves and their children in order to improve the quality of their lives, suggesting that "cultural activities that are integrated, coherent, and emotionally engaging for children are also likely to provide greater well-being" (p.71). Thus, the construct of well-being, defined as engaged participation in activities deemed desirable by a cultural community, is linked directly to families' organization of and engagement in valued cultural practices. Such cultural practices include forms of play, sports, work, and rituals such as prayer, and bedtime routines. In this view, children's extra-curricular activities not only improve children's lives, but the family's life as a whole.

Activities, also, bring with them a large amount of cultural information. As opportunities for action, development of skills and motivation, learning of specific norms, goals and affects related to the practice of any specific (structured) activity, extracurricular activities can be legitimately considered as socializing domains; the way they are organized or made available to children is, thus, deeply related to beliefs and attitudes that are relevant within a given cultural community.

At this regard, the association between higher SES and engagement in structured leisure time activities - consistently documented by many studies - leads to hypothesize that extracurricular activities may reflect the system of belief, expectations and values that correspond to families from a certain social and economic status.

Activities as children's and families' busyness

Shore (2003) expands on Weisner's theory of family engagement relating families' motivation and involvement in multiple activities to a status marker of 'busyness' that characterizes middle class families in the United States. Shore argues that families engage in activities, such as children's extra curricular activities, because, similar to a expensive new car, these activities reflect on families' achievements and successes.

What was once a stress on work as a moral virtue has expanded into a kind of obsession with all activities as status markers, with being "active" as a kind of ritual class act. Activities in this view are just like consumer goods. We display our families' busyness to our friends and neighbors much as we display our new car or home improvements. (p.8).

While Weisner (1998) emphasizes the routinized, coherent, and emotionally

balanced nature of engagement in activities as a source for family and child well-being, Shore (2003) offers a somewhat problematic explanation to why families would spend much time, effort, and money running around with their children to practices, games, recitals and competitions. Shore equates extra-curricular activities to consumer goods (such as cars), which serve to increase or maintain family's social status. Shore goes further to suggest that parents' laments about children's increased busyness, similarly to their complaints about the difficulty of living in a home during remodeling, may be at least partially an insincere concern.

We even label our kids as a hyperactive a kind of designer dysfunction of the middle-class in which the obvious lament masks a more muted but still potent component of pride (Shore, 2003:8)

Shore thus suggests that a prevailing idea in American discourse is that families are particularly busy with children-oriented activities, and that this "busyness", though stressful at times, is in fact a preferred state of being. It is uncommon to hear parents say "this weekend we had absolutely nothing scheduled; we just relaxed" or, "My children have no extra curricular activities, they just play". These pseudo quotes may sound humorous to us, possibly because they are so unlikely to occur.

This attitude towards "busyness" and children's structured time is often viewed as an American cultural construct. Indeed the voices that come from across the Atlantic ocean seem to emphasize other issues regarding the increased time that children spend in organized activities and their effect on children's lives. In Italy and other countries in Europe there exists an explicit discourse which critically portrays an extreme image of the 'overworked' and 'over-busy' child (Eurispes 2002). Italian researchers (Maggioni & Baraldi 2003; Belloni 2005) voice a concern that this increase in activities results in a decrease in play and informal interactions, and highlight the importance of 'free', unplanned, 'empty' time for children's development (Tonucci 1996; Testu & Fontaine 2001). Belloni (2005) finds that an ever increasing 'institutionalization' of children's time and activities, whereby children experiences are confined to enclosed, scheduled spaces, not only invoke adults' workplace, but more importantly leave little time and space for creative, self-determined exploration of the world as well as limit opportunities for engagement in informal friendships.

The concern in Italy over the institutionalization of children's time has also been voiced with regard to the great number of hours Italian children spend at schools. Since 1971 extra-curricular activities have been offered through an extended school day (*tempo pieno*) with no additional pay (Becchi 1979). The implementation of *tempo pieno* was in response to the increase in women's participation in the workforce and the need to match children's schedule to their mothers' work schedule but it was also inspired by the idea of offering children with opportunities to learn while doing extracurricular activities such as arts, music, physical experience. Nowadays the 'full time' program has been replaced - due to its economic costs- with flexible schedules in many schools, though it has not disappeared, especially in the elementary grades. Also, schools still offer parents the

opportunity to enroll their children in extracurricular activities (e.g. swimming, dance, piano), run by professional teachers, but at minor costs compared to private lessons. Disregarding the increase in Italian children's practice in extracurricular activities and, thus, the diffused preference of families to enroll their children in after-school activities, popular and academic discourses nostalgically refer to the 'good old days' of 'empty' time, when children had free afternoons to explore and hang out with friends in parks and neighborhood spaces (Citati 2005). This debate continues between psychologists who emphasize the need for children to play and experience the world in informal ways and spaces (Tonucci 2005) and educators who believe that children benefit from longer school hours and structured busier activities.

It is interesting to note that such debates is almost absent in U.S. academia, which tends to emphasize the positive outcome of children's engagement in extra-curricular activities. One exception is Elkind ([1988] 2001, 2007) who argues that in today's climate the increased pressure to participate in activities is a symptom of society's expectation for children to perform like adults and grow up fast. He calls for the lessening of stress put on children and for the return to imaginative play rather than organized activities. With regards to after-school programs, while similarly to the Italian perception, they are also believed to structure youth time, the dominant view is that this is to the benefit of children as such institutions provide a safe place to prevent delinquent behavior (Bartko 2005), and currently no initiatives are proposed to reform school programs or design spaces to replace extra-curricular activities with free time.

In this paper we explore U.S. and Italian parents' orientations towards children's extra-curricular activities. We examine differences and similarities reflected in children's involvement in after-school activities and their parents' attitudes towards these extra-curricular engagements. We focus on: 1) the nature and amount of extra-curricular activities families in both countries organize for their children, and 2) the meanings U.S. and Italian parents' attribute to their children's engagement in activities.

Methodology

The data in this paper are drawn from a larger body of research carried out by interdisciplinary researchers at the Sloan Center on the Everyday Lives of Families (CELF) at the University of California, Los Angeles, and the Sloan Center on the Everyday Lives of Families (iCELF) at the Università di Rome. The primary goal of both centers has been to conduct an in-depth study of the everyday lives of middle class dual-earner families through the use of hybrid methods such as video recording of everyday life, semi-structured interviews, psychological questionnaires and stress measures, and ethno-archaeological recordings of temporal and spatial dimensions of family activities in the home. The 32 families in the US and the 8 families in Italy were recruited through schools and newspaper ads. All families included two parents, each working 30 hours or more outside the home, and 2 or 3 children, with at least one child between the ages of 8 and 10. The U.S. families were all homeowners paying a monthly mortgage. The Italian families either owned or leased their home.

For the purpose of examining children's participation in extra-curricular activities and parents' views on these activities, analyses relied on parent-filled weekly activity charts and interviews with parents. Parents were given blank weekly charts divided into seven weekdays and each day into three parts (morning, afternoon, and evening) to complete for each family member. Parents were asked to fill out the charts for themselves and their children listing the activities that took place in a typical week. The charts were used to list the type of activities, and to calculate the number of activities children participated in and the amount of time they spent engaged in them. In some charts parents provided the start and end time of activities (e.g. 5pm-6:30pm soccer practice). In other cases parents only noted the beginning time of activities (e.g. 5pm- soccer practice, 7pm – dinner). In those cases we calculate the amount of time spent in one activity to be amount of time that lagged between the beginning of two consecutive activities. For example, if one chart indicated that soccer practice began at 5pm and the next activity, dinner, began at 7pm, in order to calculate how much time was dedicated to soccer practice, we estimated that out of the two hours (between 5pm and 7pm), i.e. one hour, was dedicated to the practice.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents where they were asked about their family's daily routines, their beliefs, goals, and practices related to issues of education and health. The interviews were either audio recorded or video recorded. These discussions provided numerous opportunities to understand parents' descriptions and explanations of the reasons for signing up their children for different activities].

It is important to note that while the daily routines charts and interviews capture a particular time in the life of these working families, we recognize that variance across seasons and school year calendar (e.g. in the U.S. soccer is a fall season sport, while basketball season takes place during the winter). Nevertheless, the charts and interviews were collected from different families at a various times during the school year; and, as such, they provide a representation of the families' lives across all parts of the year.

As is illustrated below, homework and education-related activities were included in the calculation of time allocation to children's activities after the school day was over, though, the analyses in this article focus on extra-curricular activities. The inclusion of "homework" and "education" categories (see Appendix) is motivated by the interest in understanding the relative proportion between time spent in school and time spent out of school in that the likelihood for the children to engage in extracurricular activities invariably depend from how much time he has 'left' from the school (or, after-school) attendance. Extracurricular activities are defined as activities that children engage in by choice outside the school system, which are not mandatory and which require payment. For the Italian sample, activities offered by the schools but run by private professional instructors were included as extracurricular activities in that they are not part of the school curriculum, voluntarily chosen by the parents, and paid.

Children's Activities: How do Children Spend their Time?

The weekly charts revealed that both in the United States and in Italy families in the studies organized many activities for their children during the afternoons and that these constituted an important part of their family life. Furthermore, the charts divulged

that in both countries similar activities are available and are taken up by families. Several salient categories of activities have been identified: 1) homework (with or without a parent's help), 2) after-school, 3) education-related activity (such as private tutoring and test preparation courses), 4) sports (both team sports, such as soccer and basketball, as well as individual sports, such as tennis and ballet), 5) music and art, 6) religious activity (such as religious schools), 7) community (such as Scouts), and 8) other, (including activities such as therapy sessions, book clubs, internships and trainings).

Charts 1 and 2 below illustrate the type of activities the children in the American and Italian samples engaged in after school and percentage of time they dedicated to these activities. In calculating time-allocation to children's activities, we decided to include homework and education-related activities in order to have a more complete portrait of how children's time is allocated arranged and illustrate how much time is set aside from mandatory or quasi-mandatory business.

Chart 1. U.S: Percentage of time spent on children's activities

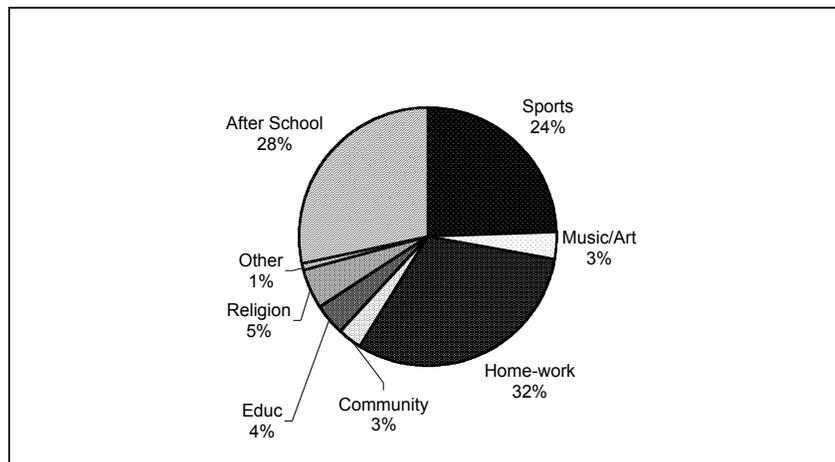
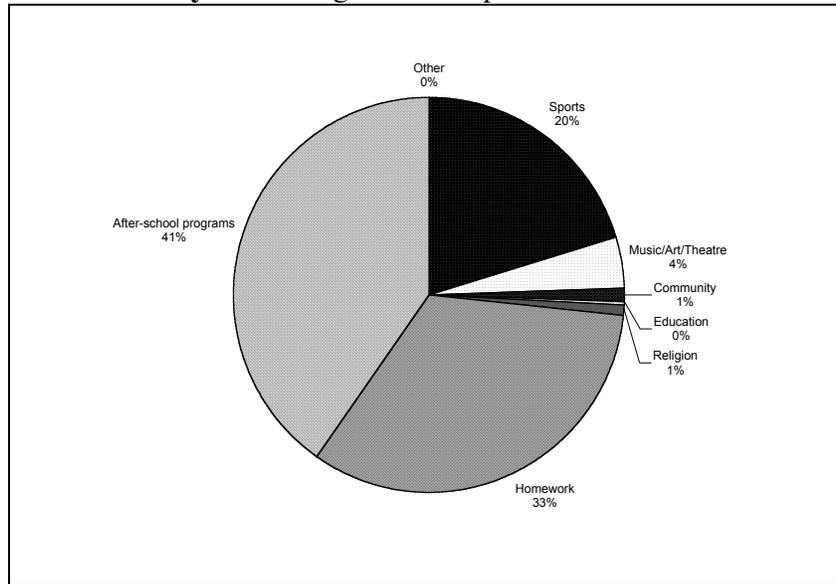


Chart 2. Italy: Percentage of time spent on children's activities



As illustrated by charts 1 and 2, in the two corpora the relative distribution of time allocation in the different activities is approximately similar: that is, activities that range “higher” in the US do the same also in the Italian corpus. Due to the difference in number of families in the two samples, this similarity cannot be exploited or pushed further than this, though, a number of considerations can be made.

First, homework appears to occupy the majority of time children spent after school in the U.S. (32%) and second most time-consuming activity for the Italian children (33%). These findings are in line with U.S. research which indicates that the amount of homework has dramatically increased in the last two decades. In Italy, the most recent analysis of the children's time allocations also reveals the same trend for children in both elementary and middle school (Belloni 2005). As a consequence of children having to complete their homework responsibilities, then, time for extra-curricular activities is reduced significantly. Since homework, often considered mandatory for children, is dictated by the schools and is outside of family control, it is possible that a sense of busyness in families is heightened by their inability to predict or negotiate how much time will be required to complete homework assignments. The examination of how schools influence the social organization of home life of the U.S. families in our study is the subject of an ongoing study (Gutierrez & Correa-Chavez, in press).

Second, the Italian children spend the majority of their after school hours (41%) in after-school programs (*tempo pieno*); U.S. children in the study, also, spend quite a lot of time in after school programs (28%). The high percentages in the two corpora can be explained due to the composition of families themselves as dual career families. Though the programs in both countries are different in many ways, the primary purpose and outcome of the after-school is to offer a place where children can be in the afternoon (till

approximately 4.30 pm but the range of options is quite large especially in the US) while their parents are at work. The substantial differences in the two programs regard both the costs and the content of the activities they offer. U.S., after-school programs are run by counselors, not educators, they do not offer formal instruction, and they are non-subsidized municipal programs which entail a substantial fee for participating children. In Italy, in contrast, *tempo pieno* is a governmental program that extends school time for children. It is run by teachers who may organize either academic (e.g. math) or non-academic activities (e.g. art & sports). Most importantly, it is free.

When examining the charts for extra-curricular activities, it is interesting to find that both in the U.S. and in Italy children not only selected to participate primarily in sports activities, but that similar portions of their time were dedicated to these activities; in the U.S. children spent 24% and in Italy 20% of their time on sports activities. The dominance of sports among U.S. children is consistent with previous research (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001), which found that most families choose sports as the most common children extra-curricular activity. Sports have always been important in American culture (Redekop, 1984), and in the past two decades, there has been an increase in girls' participation in what used to be considered primarily boys' sports activities; today, girls regularly join soccer teams, and even participating on football teams is an option. Sports is also the first activity reported in Italian statistics on children and adolescents' use of time (ISTAT 2003). With particular regard to adolescents, authors (Guicciardi et al. 2006) found that students who practice sports also display higher levels of self-efficacy – tested by questionnaires and higher motivational orientation in different tasks. Within the field of psychology of health, Italian studies recognize sports in childhood and adolescence as linked to a general perception of biopsychosocial health (Pietrantonio, Ria 2001), in that it also provides opportunity for socialization (practice in teams). Interestingly enough, all the 8 Italian families report at least one instance of sports - sometimes the unique- as their children's extracurricular activity, whereas 7 out of 32 families in the US corpus did not report any.

Other extra-curricular activities were quite less popular among families in both countries. Music/Art occupied 3% of American and 4% of Italian children's time. Community activities were even less popular, 3% for U.S. and 1% for Italian children. American children were engaged in religious activities more than their counterparts in Italy, 5% for the former and 1% for the latter. This may not be surprising as participation in religious community activities in the U.S. is relatively high compared to in western European countries. As regards Italy, the catholic tradition, though very prominent, does not equate to practice for most families; at the same time, it is very common that parents enroll their children to the Sunday school exclusively for the time (1 to 2 years usually when children are around 10) they need to prepare for the ceremony. The small percentage of attendance to religion in the Italian families of the study may also reflect the mismatch between the time of the data collection and the children's age.

To better understand the level of family commitment to children's extra-curricular activities, we have counted the number of activities for which each family choose to sign their children. This was calculated in the following way: if a family had one child who

played soccer (activity 1) , tennis (activity 2) , and piano (activity 3) and another child who played basketball (activity 4) and went to boys-scouts (activity 5), then the family had a total of 5 activities. Table 1 and 2 below display the number of activities for the U.S. and Italian families respectively.

Table 1. Number of Activities per U.S. Family

	Sports	Music/Art	Community	Religion	Education	Other	Total
Total	59	16	11	19	15	4	124

Table 2. Number of Activities per Italian Family

	Sports	Music/Art	Community	Religion	Education	Other	Total
Total	16	8	2	1	1		28

A thorough reading of the charts in both samples shows a great variation among families, some who selected to have their children participate in only one activity and some who signed their children to a number of activities. In each sample there was even a family who marked a total of 10 extra-curricular activities in the weekly charts (the number includes the activities practiced by each child). At the same time, there were families who marked very few – or no activity at all, in just one case of the US corpus- for the children. This variability can be obscured by the median of activities for each sample, which was 3 activities for the U.S. families and 2.5 activities for the Italian families.

The similarity in the relative distribution of categories within each corpus could be interpreted as the evidence of a general trend/PREFERENCE in Western, urban (prevalently white), middle-class, dual- career families to structure the children’s time, leaving them small opportunities of loose, unmonitored, self-regulated domains of action; as shown by other studies (CFR Larson and Verma 1999), this preference is not shared by non industrialized, non urban contexts, as well as within from communities lower SES.

The similarity in the two distributions also sustains the idea that middle –class parents in both countries (and cities) motivate children to attend to their school duties (as to be possibly prepared to pursue academic and professional goals in the future) and select opportunities for their children that mostly enhance their bio- physical wellbeing. At the same time, the variation across families that the daily charts documented in each corpus may let us wonder what are the elements that motivate certain parents – and their children- to select extra-curricular opportunities to enlarge the children’s experiential domain and leave other parents almost indifferent.

We were, thus, interested to find out what motivated the parents do so and how they felt about their choices.

Why do parents in the U.S. and in Italy choose to sign their children up for extra-curricular activities?

There's a certain class of people to which we belong, I think, who don't value quite as much that sort of time to sort of hang around and do nothing. Everybody's in the same boat we are, you know, little kids, two parents, going crazy (U.S. father).

The father in the quote above identifies her family as belonging to a class of people which does not ‘hang around’ and does nothing, but what motivates this group to run around and ‘go crazy’? Research in the U.S. has shown that parents believe that there is a life-long payoff from engagement in extra-curricular activities; they often explain that participation in activities such as sports nurture children’s personality and improves social, physical and cognitive skills (Gutierrez et al. 2006; Dunn et al., 2003). Participating in different activities also offers some families an opportunity to become part of a community of families who share similar values and interests (REF??). Other parents hope that participating in extra-curricular activities provides structure to their children’s lives and believe that today “childhood has become more of an organized regimented activity”.

We turned to the semi-structured interviews of parents in both the U.S. and Italy to examine what values parents in both contexts attributed to participation in extra-curricular activities. Through the examination of the parents’ interviews, we have access to the ways in which parents describe their beliefs and reason the choices they make regarding engaging their children in extra-curricular activities. Analysis of parents’ discourses further exposes the different ideological orientations which explain families’ choices and preferences. We found that, both for U.S. and Italian parents’ talk, activities are consistently described as territories and practices where children can *learn* competences and skills that refer to the social, cognitive, as well as affective domains.

Excerpt 1 - Discipline (US)

1. Mother: Her grades have really improved, not just from swimming obviously, but
2. **the discipline of having to be in a set schedule.** And she knows that
3. she’s got to do her homework at a certain time or that she won’t have the
4. time or the energy.

In excerpt 1 an American mother suggests a relationship between her 8-year-old daughter’s participation in swimming activity with an improved school performance. More specifically, the mother suggests that being part of a swim team with a set schedule of 3 practices a week and frequent swim meets on weekends has taught her daughter discipline and that this in turn helped her manage schoolwork. It is interesting to note that for this mother time management appears to be at the core of her daughter’s success.

One could argue that the daughter could simply not engage in swimming and thus will have more time for schoolwork, but this is not suggested at all during the course of the interview. We will return to this topic in the discussion section below.

The Italian mother in the next excerpt identifies a similar benefit from her daughter's activities.

Excerpt 2 – Discipline (Italy)

- 1.Res.: Is there anything [you wish] to add?
- 2.Mother: [...] well, that they do sports. which in Livia's case, actually
3. [doing] sports, in my opinion, has been very useful to her because it
4. also **teaches her to lose a bit**, when she compete. So, plus, it gives her
5. a perspective regarding how to optimize her schedule. I mean, she does
6. homework in a very **efficient** way, because- then she knows that she can
7. go and play tennis, or she can do a yacht race, or she can do something.
8. So, from this point of view, I consider [sports] to be very important.
9. It gives her **discipline**. And also music, it's the same; music helps her
10. build her **concentration skills**.

As it is visible from excerpt 2, the skill –i.e. discipline - does not only apply to the level of commitment labeled as 'concentration skills' by the mother (excerpt 2, line 10)- toward the activity but also to a general ability to plan and adhere to the time constraints imposed by the children's agenda of the tasks and activities (i.e. "optimize her schedule", line 5). Interestingly enough, the mother emphasizes the importance of sports and, particularly, competitive sports - sailing and tennis in this case- in teaching *to lose* (line 4) and, thus, to cope with failure and frustration. This tendency to de-emphasize the meaning of (the pursuit of) 'achievement' and 'success' embedded in such sports pairs with the formulation that she does of other activities (i.e., music) as teaching concentration skills, rather than socializing to performance.

Behind the mother's words there is some idea of a learning 'transfer' (REF) of the skill developed and practiced in one domain to other spheres of actions and to a general ability of planning and managing the time / busyness one has at his disposal. If we compare the two excerpts, we could notice how, whereas the American mother centers on the improvement of the girl's grades, the Italian mother tries to focus on the girl's ability to monitor and control her internal states, as well as to develop mental skills, with no reference to the possible desired, 'public' outcomes. We have found other instances in which Italian parents display their 'suspicion' toward competitiveness and success related to sports and other extracurricular activities (see excerpt 9, *parents' concerns*).

Parents also recognized that their children's participation in certain extra-curricular activities can increase important personal traits, such as self-esteem, and self-confidence. In the excerpt below, in response to the interviewer's question about why it is important for them that their daughters participate in sports, a U.S. mother and father declare that soccer has given their daughter confidence.

Excerpt 3 – Confidence (US)

1. Res.: And-and why is that important to you, especially them being girls and-

2. thinking themselves as-someone who's active and does sports?

 3. Mother: Sonya's a little bit- she's **not as assertive**, and I think that **sports have given her more-** she's more-
 4. **given her more-** she's more-
 5. Father: Definitely yes.
 6. Mother: **-a bit on the passive side.** And she's been playing sports for a long time.
 7. The first year she played soccer and she cried. Every game she would
 8. stand on the field and cry... Second year she got around and she really
 9. liked it. And so for her, **I think it's been a great thing- its' given her**
 10. **confidence.**

In this example this mother suggests, and the father enthusiastically agrees (line 5), that soccer has been a 'great thing' for their daughter because it transformed her from a person with some personal deficits ('not as assertive' in line 3 and 'a bit on the passive side' in line 6) into a person with confidence. In the rest of the sequence, that we did not show for the sake of brevity, the mother goes on to explain that she values this trait in particular because of her concern of gender differences (embedded in the same formulation of the interviewer's question) in the socialization of girls to being competitive and assertive. Implicit in this mother's discourse is the desire to instill in her daughter skills that will help her succeed in the future as a woman.

Excerpt 4 – Confidence (Italy)

1. Mother: well both sports and music. they show this: this feature of:
 2. either confronting with the others in many things and
 3. confronting with oneself I mean- I mean
 4. both - both aspects ()

This Italian mother also seems to consider the practice of extracurricular activities as an area in which children can exercise in acknowledging their resources and limits, by facing the comparison and challenges with other peers. Taking into account the perspectives of others and developing the concept of a "comparative self", they pay-off of the activities and valued as a positive result *per se*.

The desire that their children acquire important skills and traits through their extra-curricular activities that are important for future success include the betterment of one's life through good habits, particularly habits pertaining to one's health. Many parents talked about the need to be active as a way of being healthy. Some even expressed the hope that the participation in sports activities during childhood will become engrained into their children's perception of themselves as athlete so to guarantee that they will remain active for the rest of their lives. However, at times parents met with resistance from their not-so athletic children. In excerpt 5 below we learn from a U.S. mother that parents do not only sign up their children to an activity, but that they have to continuously push them.

Excerpt 5 – Being Active (U.S.)

1. Res.: When did she start taking [ice-skating] lessons?
 2. Mother: Well, we were trying to find something- she's not into competitive sports.
 3. We were trying to find **some exercise, something for her to do... We'd**

4. **like them to have some kind of physical activity, un, extra-curricular,**
5. **you know, going on.** It's not a problem with Daniel... But with her, **we**
6. **really have to push her.**

In this example this U.S. mother explicitly expresses an ideology that she and her husband (whom she includes in the plural pronoun 'we') espouse: the importance of their children's physical activity. The mother goes on to explain to the researcher that this is true regardless of their children's personal tendencies and preferences; the son it is not a problem because he enjoys sports (we learn later that he plays basketball, soccer and more), but the daughter is much less interested.

The mother talks about a collective 'we' referring to a collective decision where the parent portrays what is good, healthy and valuable for children. This example brings forth the issue of competing desires and the possible conflicts that can arise around participation in activities. In another family we found that a child would have preferred to participate in an activity his parents did not support, and in yet another family, another child revealed that they no longer participated in team sports because the father was too demanding and competitive. These examples remind us that children's participation in activities is not always fun and harmonious. Insofar as activities are considered health resources and socializing tools, parents may insist for their children to practice them even against the children's immediate desires and interests.

The desire for children to be active was also expressed in Italian parents' interviews. In the example below, an Italian mother brings up two conflicting ideologies, the first that views children as 'over-stimulated' and suggests that they do less, and the second which worries about inactivity and boredom and promotes keeping children busy.

Excerpt 6 – Being Active (Italy)

1. Res.: From what I can see, they are very busy.
2. Mother: Yes. I **believe that they need to keep busy**. I was debating with the
3. teachers (about whether) the children are too over-stimulated. Then I
4. realized that I am not at home. Thus, if I were home, if they had the
5. opportunity to know how to get bored or how to- I don't think it's true that
6. one needs to know how to be bored. I don't see any reason for that.

The Italian mother's discourse reported above seems to mirror the debate that is also voiced among academic and popular literature in Italy (reported in the introduction) whether the children can be damaged by the time and energy pressure associated with the engagement in extracurricular activities. As it is in other domains related to the kids' caretaking, parents are faced with the task of making choices in uncertain conditions, given the dynamicity and unpredictability of the interaction between the child's (internal resources) development and the environmental opportunities that are offered to her; these ones, in fact, may have a deeper influence – as compared to adults- on a personality that is still in progress. The mother, then, describes the whole and complex trajectory of her personal reasoning – that she has also to defend against the teachers' opinions - when she had to decide whether to push her children toward busyness or tolerate their time to be

empty (and, eventually, boring). Material, “real” constraints (i.e., the evidence that she cannot be at home when the children come back from school; line 4), then, made her decide toward the first option. In this sense, we could argue that activities are interpreted by this mother as a way to monitor, even if without her material presence, the children’s time; it is as if warranting the children this opportunity, and assisting them in participating to the activities, could assume the meaning of a displaced caretaking, a concern about long-term benefits of these developmental and socializing experiences, an argument to which we will return in the discussion.

Parental Concerns regarding Participation in Extra-Curricular Activities

Though U.S. and Italian parents’ interviews reveal a consistent belief that extra-curricular activities offered important benefits for their children, at times parents also expressed some concerns regarding the commitment to such activities. However, there was a difference in what concerned the U.S. parents versus the Italian parents. In the U.S. when parents expressed any discontent it was because they felt that the commitment to participation in activities created an imposition on their own.

Excerpt 7 – Concerns (U.S.)

1. Res.: What- you said, and you both said, that, you know, you wish that you
2. could do more. What keeps you from being able to do-?
3. Mother: The kids. **All their activates, all their running**, all their studying. I run
4. with them more. Tommy [husband] does some on weekends. **During the**
5. **week I'm running.**

When asked what keeps them from exercising more frequently, the U.S. mother in excerpt 7 explains that it is the constant running with the kids, thus suggesting a causal relationships between her inability to take care of herself and the need to attend to her children’s need. Elsewhere the father explains that their children become more independent, the parents’ responsibilities increase.

Excerpt 8 – Concerns (U.S.)

1. Father: They're more independent but they have more needs now... But now
2. they're older, they're involved in more activities than they were when they
3. were younger. So there's that additional responsibility.

The excerpt we analyzed from the Italian corpus shows a different concern from Italian parents. Italian parents appear to be more concerned with their children’s well-being being compromised because engagement in activities can result in the experience of stress and exhaustion. In the excerpt below, an Italian father is torn between his satisfaction with his daughter’s participation in swimming activities which offer her fun social opportunities, and his worry that the competitive aspect of the swimming activity results in stress and anxiety.

Excerpt 9 – Concerns (Italy)

1. Father: I am really happy that she does swimming. I'm fine if she competes just
2. for fun, and plays with other children. But if she competes **getting**
3. **stressed** that she has to win, **getting anxious** that she cannot lose, crying
4. if she doesn't qualify, or if she doesn't win a medal, then I think it's
5. damaging and that at seven-year-old one should avoid it.

This father suggests that the stress of competitiveness at his daughter's young age is damaging, yet he does not explicitly state that she should discontinue her stop her involvement. In another example, another Italian father is empathetic with his daughter's grueling schedule.

Excerpt 10 – Concerns (Italy)

1. Father: She was **tired**. I mean when someone spends all those hours at school and
2. then comes home at 5 o'clock to get the bag and go swimming...**it's not**
3. **easy**. On Saturdays when one would like to relax, she has to go swimming
4. at eleven for two hours.

This father is worried that his daughter is too tired after a full day at school to then go to swimming. By using the generic pronoun, 'one would like to relax', he is suggesting that wanting to rest on Saturday is the normal thing to do, but that his daughter is unfortunate because she *has* to go swimming for two hours. Similarly to the father in excerpt 9, this father is critical of the undesirable consequences of his child's participation in extra-curricular activities, yet he does not consider the possibility of ending this commitment.

In the last two excerpts Italian parents raise the dilemma that they must face. While they recognize the positive benefits of children's engagement in extra-curricular activities, the socialization to valuable traits and skills and the experience of fun and social activities, they are at the same concerned because these activities impede on their children's time and can result in stress and anxiety. In contrast, the U.S. parents in our sample did not express concerns that participation in sports, music and other activities could entail ramifications for their children. If they were dissatisfied, it was because of the burden that they themselves felt with the need to accommodate their children's busy schedule.

Discussion

There is a perception in the U.S. that children's busyness is an American phenomenon (Shore 2003). Our findings suggest that children in Italy are similarly engaged in extra-curricular activities; this study reveals that American and Italian parents in both countries arrange their children's lives in very similar ways in terms of type and number of activities and the amount of time spent on them. Furthermore, interviews in both countries also show that parents' attitudes towards these activities are often similar; in both sites parents perceived extra-curricular activities as a means for acquiring

important skills and traits that will ensure their children's future professional and personal success.

How are we to understand these similarities? We propose that the resemblance in U.S. and Italian parents' choices regarding engagement in and attitude toward children's extra-curricular activities may be due in part to an increasingly shared global middle-class values and ideologies pertaining to parenting and the perception of childhood in the western, capitalistic world.

At the core of the literature on contemporary American childhood is the idea that the perception of children has changed from viewing children as innocent in need of parents' and society's protection, to perceiving children as adult-like. Most researchers link this transformation to the postmodern era, but offer differing explanation for the change in children's status.

The developmental psychologist David Elkind, in his books 'The Hurried Child' (2001) and 'Ties That Stress: The New Family Imbalance' (1994), examines the American childhood phenomenon of growing 'too-fast-too-soon', and suggests that one of the dominant causes for the shift in society's attitude toward childhood and for the change in children's daily lives, including the increased participation in extra-curricular activities, is the postmodern experience of a rapidly changing world. The realization that nothing in the future is permanent, he argues, results in parents experiencing a significant increase in stress due to job insecurities, loneliness, and lack of safety. This deep-seated stress, like other health problems, Elkind suggests, may cause people to become self-absorbed and reduce interest and concern with others. This self-centeredness stands in conflict with the effort and attention needed to raising children. In other words, stress may induce parents to put their own needs before those of their children. Elkind continues, "such parents need the support, the companionship, and the symbolic achievements of their children to relieve their stress." (2001, p. 48); that is, these parents treat their children as adults, expecting competence, autonomy and self-reliance beyond their cognitive and emotional developmental abilities. In other words, perceiving children as competent, adult-like, relieves parents and society from much of the responsibility for protecting and caring for children (2001, 1994).

Elkind's argument provides an explanation for the adult-like schedules, rushed pace, and increased pressure and competition that children may experience in their engagement in activities. However, it does not explain why parents consistently view extra-curricular activities as carrying long-term benefits for their children. Similarly to Elkind, Kapur (2005) suggests that the transformation in the perception of children from innocent infants to competent adults is the result of postmodern "wider historical and material changes in which children are increasingly imagined in culture and social policy, sold to in the market, and tried in judicial courts as adults" (p. 8). However, rather than suggesting, as does Elkind, that the transformation of children into mini adults is a parental coping mechanism with postmodern stress (which could potentially be resolved if parents modified their perception), Kapur suggests that it is the expectation of the free-market capitalistic economy that the family work and provide for itself, while

simultaneously and systematically eroding its ability to do so effectively, which results in the change in children's status. That is, the less society assists the family in caring for its members, the more the family fails to provide care, the more is the demand on individuals, including children, to take care of themselves. "That is how", explains Kapur, "the children are welcomed into the new century: just like everyone else, they have to labor and produce for themselves... free-market society has no patience with those who can't pay for the ride" (p.7, 2005).

Following Kapur's argument then, if in postmodern capitalist society, of which the U.S. is the extremer case, families, and children in particular, have to fend for themselves, it is not surprising, we argue, that parents select, prioritize, and invest in activities that they believe will prepare their children for survival in that world. Indeed, one can see how the acquisition of traits and skills parents associate with extra-curricular activities, such as self-confidence, discipline, competitiveness, time management, leadership and team work, can prepare a child for life in a capitalist society in which, with the further decrease in state control and monitor, one's survival and success depends heavily on one's ability to stay disciplined and competitive. These extra-curricular activities also provide a place where parents and children meet, both ideally and materially.

The Città dei Bambini (offered in most cities) is a project planned and administrated by a children's council, and applies changes and innovations to the city's spatial and temporal structure (i.e. safe streets, parks, buildings, but also hours of school, play, commute) to better suit the children's needs by emphasizing the need for the city (and their public representatives) to provide children with space for free play, and free time where children can meet their peers and socialize. This initiative signals a transition from an idea of the child as a subject in need of protection with life-worlds separate from adult life and responsibility to the idea of the child as a more autonomous (at least partially self-determining) subject.

Through the examination of participation in extra-curricular activities and parents' attitudes toward and reasons for their children's engagement in an American and Italian sample, we were propelled to explore the hypothesis that we are living in a period of globalization of middle-class values, especially those pertaining to parenting and perception of childhood. This paper contributes to the understanding of how broader social changes can influence children's and families' choices, activities, and daily routines.

Endnotes

1. Categorization of Activities

1. Homework - only direct mention of homework on chart. If homework is the only activity mentioned over more than 1 1/2 hours (without giving the end time), we then divide the total time available in 2.
2. Education - refers to paid tutoring and going to tutoring centers (e.g. Score and Kumon in the U.S. data)
3. After-school programs - In the U.S. refers to all time spent in after-school program regardless of mention of any activities that take place in that location. In Italy and Sweden this category will have to be defined.
4. Sports - in the U.S. this includes all voluntary, structured, organized, sports activities. When sports activities were mentioned without time allocation, we gave it 1 1/2 hours. In Italy and Sweden this category will have to be defined.
5. Music & Art& Theatre - Includes lessons outside and inside the home, as well as practices of instruments and singing. If practice is mentioned without time allocation, we give it 30 minutes.
6. Religion - Includes Sunday schools (sometimes not really on Sunday) and services. If more than one child attended services, we still counted the time only once (vs. multiplying by number of children attending).
7. Community - community service, volunteering, girls/boys scouts, etc.
8. Other - including therapy sessions, book clubs, auditioning for commercials etc.
9. Homework - only direct mention of homework on chart. If homework is the only activity mentioned over more than 1 1/2 hours (without giving the end time), we then divide the total time available in 2.
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