

# Play? Chores? Work? Unanswered questions on the nature of children's domestic activities: A review of theories and evidence with a special focus on Guyana



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## INTRODUCTION

In many societies, children are considered important producers of resources and services promoting their families' wellbeing. Children can earn income from **economic work (wage labor)** or free parents' time by assisting in **domestic work (unpaid labor)** including childcare. This review evaluates research on children's work in relation to biological outcomes, highlighting this as an important area of investigation for human biologists, and presents Guyana as a potential research site.

## REVIEW OF CHILDREN'S WORK: CHILD LABOR

Much of the literature concerning children's work focuses on the causes, costs, and benefits of *child labor*. Unsurprisingly, poverty is the pinpointed as the major *cause* of child labor.<sup>2,12,14</sup> Researchers have highlighted the *costs* incurred by the child laborers, both in terms of education and health, which may have long-term negative consequences in the form of educational and health deficits. *Benefits* of children's economic work have also been discussed, especially in terms of skill acquisition and contributions to household income.



### Effects of Child Labor

#### Educational Costs:

- School enrollment rates<sup>15</sup>
- School attendance rates<sup>1</sup>
- Time spent on schoolwork<sup>15</sup>

#### Health Costs:

- Exposure to accidents<sup>2</sup>
- Exposure to diseases<sup>2</sup>
- Exposure to ergonomic hazards<sup>2</sup>
- Poorer dietary diversity<sup>9</sup>
- Faltering growth<sup>13,17,28</sup>
- Exposure to physical and psychological abuse<sup>26</sup>

#### Benefits:

- Learning adult gender roles<sup>3,24</sup>
- In effort to improve family's standard of living<sup>25,26</sup>

## GENDER AND DOMESTIC WORK

Definitions of child labor often do not consider domestic chores and activities. "Domestic activities are not generally viewed as problematic, and they are not considered a threat to children's future economic outcomes" (Zapata et al 2011: 588).



Children's domestic work is often a gendered activity.<sup>1,20,23,24,28,29</sup> In their discussion of children's activity patterns around the world, Larsen and Verma state, "across nearly all populations—regardless of economic development or schooling—girls spend more time in household labor than do boys" (1999: 707). Girls generally perform tasks *in* the home, such as cleaning, childcare, and cooking.<sup>20,24,28</sup>

While boys are generally viewed to incur the most educational cost when using the tradition definition of child labor, when "the definition of work [is expanded] to include both market and domestic activities, compared to boys, girls are less likely to be in school and more likely to be working" (Kruger 2007: 19). Boys and girls are working in different arenas. Focusing solely on child economic work generates a biased view of the potential impact on health and development

### Domestic work may influence:

- Poorer nutritional and growth status of girls<sup>9,28</sup>
- Lower school enrollment and attendance of girls<sup>1,15,23,29</sup>



## THE RELEVANT THEORIES INVOLVING CHILDRENS WORK

The importance of children's work is acknowledged in the **helpers-at-the-nest theory (also called the cooperative breeding strategy), and wealth flows theory**. These emphasize benefits to the parents and household without considering impacts on the child-helper's current and future wellbeing. The **embodied capital theory** does include impacts of children's work on the child-helper. I plan to merge these three theories by looking at the benefits that accrue to the household as well as the short and long-term costs of work to children.

### Helpers-at-the-nest (a.k.a. Cooperative breeding)

- Children engage in helping behaviors that reduce the workload of mother, whose time can be allocated to other activities that may increase her reproductive success.<sup>6,10,16,22</sup>

### Wealth flows

- While children are expensive to parents in terms of time, energy, and resources, they are able to contribute significantly to the household, therefore reducing the costs of having multiple children.<sup>18,21</sup>

### Embodied capital

- Both children and parents invest in future adults by adding to the growth-based and experience-based embodied capital of the child.<sup>4,5</sup> This framework can be used to better understand the determinants of children's time allocation by comparing the trade-offs between various activities and the consequences of net investment in either growth-based or experience-based embodied capital.<sup>4,5</sup>

## GUYANA: A RESEARCH SITE FOR INVESTIGATING GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT CONSEQUENCES OF CHILDREN'S DOMESTIC ACTIVITIES

### Country Summary:

- Guyana, an English-speaking country on the northern coast of South America (see figure 1) of about 751,000 people. Ethnic composition, resulting from colonialism, slavery, and indentured labor, is comprised of East Indians (~43%), Africans (~30%). Mixed (~15%) and Amerindians (~9%). Agriculture is an important source of livelihood for much of its population.

### Importance as a Research Site:

- Around 72% children engage in domestic work and a sexual division of labor is commonplace.<sup>8,11</sup>
- The type of economy in which families are situated influences the problems and trade-offs they must confront in relation to children's embodied capital.<sup>5</sup> With increasing urbanization, Guyana offers the opportunity to understand the impact of the urban-rural transition on the lives of children.



## TESTING HYPOTHESES ABOUT CHILD DOMESTIC WORK IN RELATION TO EMBODIED CAPITAL

While children are important producers of resources and services in the home, a critical gap is the lack of focus on girls' involvement in domestic work. While domestic work and childcare have been studied, the emphasis has been on the impacts on the parents and other siblings, rather than on the child-workers/helpers. Researchers such as Bock (2002) and Brewis and Lee (2010) have begun to fill this niche by utilizing the embodied capital theory. Bock highlights the importance of family composition, subsistence ecology, and gender of the child on children's time allocation to work and education.<sup>4</sup> Possibly explained by variations in family income, Brewis and Lee found that children who allocated more time towards domestic work have lower weight-for-age z scores.<sup>9</sup>

In Guyana, I will assess the gender differences in children's involvement in domestic work and the impact on growth and development, and the ways in which the rural-urban transition impacts the trade-offs made in regards to time allocation and embodied capital. Childhood is a period of growth and learning, building a child's embodied capital, so a focus on domestic work can illuminate the consequences of children's time allocation. This work will contribute to the field of human biology by providing insight into determinants and consequences of children's work.

### Research questions:

- 1) What types of helping behaviors and activities do children engage in, and what factors contribute to variation in these behaviors?
- 2) How do children's helping behaviors and activities affect their health, growth, and development?
- 3) How do children's helping behaviors and activities affect the health and time allocation of the other members of their families, and the household economic budget?
- 4) How do children in rural and urban settings differ in terms of time allocation and health, growth, development?

### Methods:

- 1) Time allocation study - focal follows
- 2) Accelerometry
- 3) Anthropometry
- 4) Activity & dietary surveys/questionnaires
- 5) Interviews & group discussions with children
- 6) Life histories of parents - childhood activities & adult wellbeing

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