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## PARENTAL LABOR IN CHINESE FAMILIES: DIVISION BY FUNCTIONS AND ACTORS



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*The study of the division of parental labor within Chinese families has a certain significance in the context of modern reality, characterized by the continuing low birth rate. In relevant works, the care and upbringing of children is most often taken into account by the household as a whole and is rarely considered as a separate specialized work. The concept of parental labor in the research of Russian scientists is proposed as a new approach and tool for researching and mitigating demographic problems, stimulating fertility. We conducted a questionnaire survey of more than 700 Chinese parents with children under the age of 15 in 2024. We studied the actors of the intra-family division of parental labor, the functions and content that they assume in this process. The paper showed that the main actor of parental labor is women, who attract grandparents to help with the care and upbringing of children. Mothers account for more than or almost half of the routine, educational, and therapeutic-preventive functions. We also found that the difference in income within married couples affects the amount of time women spend on child care: mothers who earn less than their fathers spend more time caring for children compared to mothers who have higher incomes than their spouses, but no such difference was*

*found for fathers. The research results can be used to further study and identify differences in the level of satisfaction with the division of labor in the family, and also justify the development of family policy measures that promote a rational division of labor and increase satisfaction with this division among various actors of this type of labor.*

*Parental labor, intra-family division of labor, child care, family support.*

## Introduction

Since the start of the “one family, three children” policy in the People’s Republic of China in 2021, various measures to support and stimulate fertility have been developed and implemented in many cities: monthly child care subsidies, one-time subsidies related to the birth of a child, increased mortgages for large families, etc. Despite this, the total fertility rate in China has remained low in recent years: in 2022<sup>6</sup> it was 6.77, in 2023 – 6.39, and in 2024 – 6.77 ppm. For comparison, we can cite recent figures for 2016–2019, when its value was 10–14 permille<sup>1</sup>. One of the reasons for the lack of significant positive dynamics in the field of fertility is the reduction in the total number of women of childbearing age<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, the researchers note that the adjustment and weakening of the impact of politics at the macro level has led to an increase in the individual “reproductive autonomy” of the family in relation to childbearing, which has become an important factor influencing fertility at the micro level (Wang Jun, Wang Guangzhou, 2021). Socio-economic factors such as the problem of labor and employment, a sharp increase in the cost of raising children and housing, the weakening of family functions and the lack of intergenerational support caused by population mobility and a reduction in family size, as well as the conflict between women’s self-development and childbearing, the transformation of motherhood and the formation of a culture of low fertility in society, have further reduced the desire of modern

young people to make decisions about having children (Wang Guangzhou, Zhou Yujiao, 2021; Zhai Zhenwu, Li Shuting, 2023).

In recent years, much attention has been paid to the problems of child care and upbringing in science and social practice. Scientists note that the contradictions that arise in the process of caring for children and their upbringing are becoming more acute (role conflict among women, the balance between work and parenting among mothers). The results of a study of families with children under three years old conducted in 12 cities show that for more than 80% of mothers with two children, the birth of a second child affects professional development, while mothers from low-income families and mothers with low salaries are more likely to interrupt their careers at the birth of a second child to “return to family” (Hong Xiumin, Zhu Wenting, 2020). Such “time compression” associated with caring for children can negatively affect the desire and time of childbearing among young women. In a study on women who consciously refuse motherhood, it was found that the most common causes of childlessness are unwillingness to sacrifice their time and freedom for another person, unwillingness to get into a dependent position (Zakharova, 2015).

There is an increase in the negative impact of multiple births on women’s work and employment in the context of the transformation of demographic policy toward

<sup>1</sup> The World Bank database. Birth rate in China. Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.CBRT.IN?end=2023&locations=CN&start=1960&view=chart> (accessed: 07.06.2025).

<sup>2</sup> State Statistical Office of China. The rate of decline in the total population has decreased, and the quality of the population continues to improve. Available at: [https://www.stats.gov.cn/sj/sjjd/202501/t20250117\\_1958337.html/](https://www.stats.gov.cn/sj/sjjd/202501/t20250117_1958337.html/) (accessed: 07.06.2025).

encouragement (Guo Fengming et al., 2023), insufficient participation or absence of fathers in parenthood (Xu Yiting, 2020), there is an intensification of motherhood caused by the marketing of education and increased competition for the best educational resources when applying to schools, etc. (Yang Ke, 2018).

The results of the national sample survey “Study of fertility mechanisms and support for families of reproductive age in conditions of low fertility”, conducted in 2021, show that the conflict between work and family negatively affects women’s willingness to re-procreate. This conflict can be mitigated by the support of family members in the child care process, including spouses and the older generation (Zhang Xiaoqian, Song Jian, 2024).

It has also been found that the tendency for responsibilities related to children’s education to be entirely within the competence of mothers, which is observed during the transformation of motherhood in modern Chinese society, not only increases the burden on mothers, but also generates anxiety, reinforcing negative emotions in women’s social groups (Yang Di, Jin Yihong, 2022).

In addition, in recent years, the problem of “nervousness in parenting” among the middle-class population has been discussed and investigated. It is believed that the development of children in the middle class is associated with the prospect of future class mobility of generations. This means that children, as the center of the family, need to invest more and more resources – not only material resources, but also a lot of time and energy, that children require a high degree of emotional dedication and “wise parenting”. This also places increased demands on mothers as primary caregivers (Chen Meng, 2018).

At the same time, research by scientists shows that the husband’s involvement in child care increases the level of female employment (especially for women with two children) and has a potential impact on fertility growth

due to the mitigation of conflict between work and family (Mao Zhuoyan, Wan Linlin, 2024). Modern Chinese women include both traditional and modern elements in the ideal portrait of a spouse (financial support for the family, and sharing household chores), while men’s income and the time they spend doing household chores have an impact on women’s satisfaction with marriage (Xu Qi, 2021). In addition, the joint participation and cooperation of parents in the process of parenting contributes to the development of parent-child relationships, improving children’s academic performance at school and enriching their leisure activities (Zhang Chunni et al., 2024).

There are many factors that influence the separation of parental responsibilities in the family. In one study conducted in Australia and the United States on the division of housework, scientists found that women reduced the amount of housework as their income increased, until the spouses’ contribution to income became equal, which corresponds to the theory of exchange (Bittman et al., 2003). Research in China shows that improving women’s education helps reduce gender inequality in the division of household chores, but may exacerbate gender inequality in the division of childcare responsibilities (Xu Qi, 2021).

This issue is being studied in Russia within the framework of the concept of parental labor. In the works of Russian researchers (Il’ves, Sergeeva, 2015; Bagirova et al., 2017; Cheresnova, 2021), parental labor is considered as a type of labor corresponding to the characteristics of labor, having its components, including content, object, material and result. Parental labor is defined as a process of conscious, expedient activity through which actors form the quantitative and qualitative characteristics of children’s human capital, satisfying social and personal

needs in the process of this activity (Bagirova et al., 2022).

We should note that there are very few studies devoted to the division of parental labor between its actors, interaction models, conflict resolution mechanism and power relations in the process of its implementation. By applying the concept of parental labor, we hope to enrich research on this issue by examining the division of labor using the example of Chinese families and offering scientific and sound recommendations for improving the organization of parental labor in practice.

The aim of our research is to identify the features of the intra-family division of parental labor (including the actors of labor, the content of the division of labor), as well as factors that may influence it.

### Method of the research

The source of the information was the results of an online survey conducted in Shijiazhuang at the end of 2024 (n = 738). The city of Shijiazhuang is located in Northern China, is the capital of Hebei Province and an important transportation hub of the country. In addition to the city itself, its administration includes several counties and villages. By the end of 2022, the number of permanent residents in it amounted to 11.22 million people, urban residents – 8.02 million people<sup>3</sup>. In 2022, the city's gross domestic product amounted to 710.06 billion yuan, the disposable income per capita of the urban population was 35.266 yuan, and the per capita income of urban residents was 44.745 yuan<sup>4</sup>.

The object of empirical sociological research is urban residents with one or more children under the age of 15. The selection is random; 30.1% of the respondents were men and 69.9% were women. To reduce the impact of the uneven gender distribution of respondents, the questionnaire also asked questions about spouses.

The most common type of family turned out to be a two-child family: more than half of the respondents (55.1%) have two children, 40.5% have one child, and very few respondents had three or more children (4.3%). The age distribution of parents is as follows: 65.7% are 30–39 years old, 26.4% are 40–49 years old, the proportion of respondents aged 20–29 years is 7.2%. As for the places of residence of family members of the older generation, almost three quarters of grandparents live with the respondents' family in the same city, and there are 40.2% of families in the array with whom grandparents live in the same city at the same time, both on the paternal and maternal sides. In only 23% of cases, the grandparents do not live in the same city as the respondents.

### Research results

Within the family, one of the important actors of labor is the older generation – grandparents. In our study, only 18.7% of respondents believe that grandparents are obligated to help and participate in child care. However, in the real division of labor, the share of grandparents involved in the process of caring for grandchildren is very high. The results prove that the vast majority of grandparents in the families of the surveyed (about 80%) were involved in parental labor: 64.9% on the paternal side of the child and 58.1% on the maternal side help with child care. Only 17.8% of families, i.e. That is, less than one fifth of the respondents' families did not involve grandparents in parental labor, and the number of families where both paternal and maternal grandparents help at the same time is 46.2% (almost half of all respondents). At the same time, 27.1% of respondents said they had invited grandparents to look after their children so that they could continue working on their own. Regarding the involvement of others, it can be said that only 11.7% of the respondents

<sup>3</sup> Shijiazhuang City Statistical Office. The static yearbook of the city for 2023. Available at: <https://tjj.sjz.gov.cn/columns/7de8ce3b-2c70-4ea5-a3eb-e084223b5c52/202408/22/fb01aa74-a399-40f0-a3ea-af135cdfa641.html> (accessed: 10.04.2025).

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

**Table 1. Distribution of respondents' responses to the question about the main actor of parental labor in relation to a child under three years of age**

Respond option	One-child family (n = 299)		Large family*					
			1st child (n = 439)		2nd child (n = 439)		3rd child (n = 33)	
	male	female	male	female	male	female	male	female
You	24.0	<b>62.6</b>	11	<b>65.7</b>	11.9	<b>66.4</b>	10	<b>77.3</b>
Spouse	<b>41.3</b>	2.6	<b>64.4</b>	0.9	<b>65.3</b>	1.2	<b>70</b>	-
Grandfather, grandmother	26.0	28.2	20.3	29.3	19.5	27.1	10	9.1
Babysitter, housekeeper	5.8	2.6	3.4	1.9	1.7	3.1	10	9.1
Someone else	2.9	4.1	0.8	2.2	1.7	2.2	-	4.5
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

\* The number of respondents who answered questions about the 4th child is extremely small, their answers are not presented in the table.  
Source: survey results.

hired nannies or housekeepers, and the annual income of such families was mostly 100,000 yuan and above.

According to respondents, spouses (53.4%) provide the most assistance/support in child care and upbringing, followed by grandparents, and among the grandparents there are significantly more grandmothers (34.7%) than grandfathers (7.6%).

*Table 1* presents data on the main actors of parental labor caring for children under the age of three in families with different numbers of children.

The data show that only 24% of men in one-child families mainly took care of children under three years old; families were much more likely to rely on their mother (41.3%) and grandparents (26%). Judging by the responses of female respondents, more than half of women (62.6%) mostly took care of children themselves, followed by grandparents – 28.2%, and fathers took care of children only in 2.6% of cases.

There is a similar distribution in large families: according to male respondents, in about 10% of cases, fathers looked after children under the age of three as the main caregivers, and their spouses much more – about 65% of cases. In the case of women's responses to the same question, their share is about the same as in men's responses about their spouses, and the share of their spouses has decreased; the share of grandparents is practically the same in the responses of the two groups of respondents.

We also revealed the average estimates of the time spent on daily child care. *Table 2* proves that, according to the respondents' responses about themselves, the majority of men (45%) spend 1–2 hours a day caring for children, the largest share of women (37.2%) also spends 1–2 hours, but the answers “3–4 hours” and “more than 4 hours” are much more common in women than in men; women are much less likely than men to have the answer “less than 1 hour”.

Respondents' answers about their spouse basically coincide with respondents' answers

**Table 2. Distribution of respondents' responses to the question about the daily time spent on children**

Respond option	Answer about yourself		Answer about the spouse	
	men	women	men	women
Less than 1 hour	20.3	5.2	8.8	34.4
1–2 hours	45.9	37.2	38.1	41.9
3–4 hours	24.3	30.4	29.4	15.1
More than 4 hours	9.5	27.1	23.7	8.6
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: survey results.

about themselves: more often than not, fathers and mothers spend 1–2 hours raising and caring for their children every day, while women more often spend 3–4 hours on this activity than men. The only difference compared to the responses of male respondents is that the share of fathers

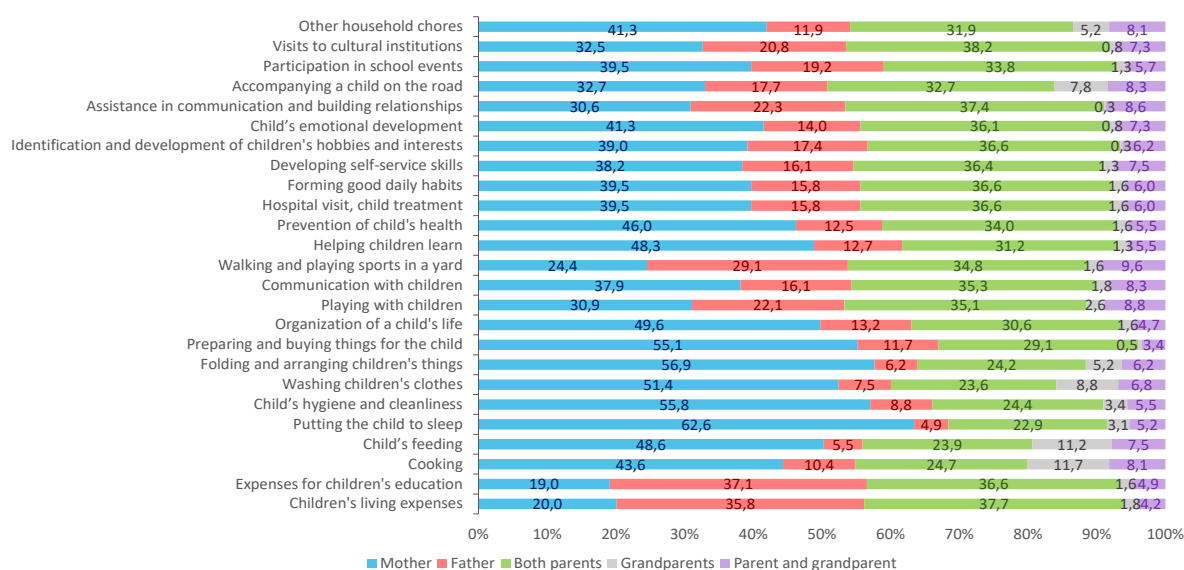


who take care of their children for less than 1 hour a day has increased in the responses of women about their spouse.

Depending on the income between the spouses, we can note that the highest intensity of parental labor is recorded among women who earn less than their spouses. They spend more time with their children compared to respondents with higher incomes or similar incomes than their spouses. At the same time,

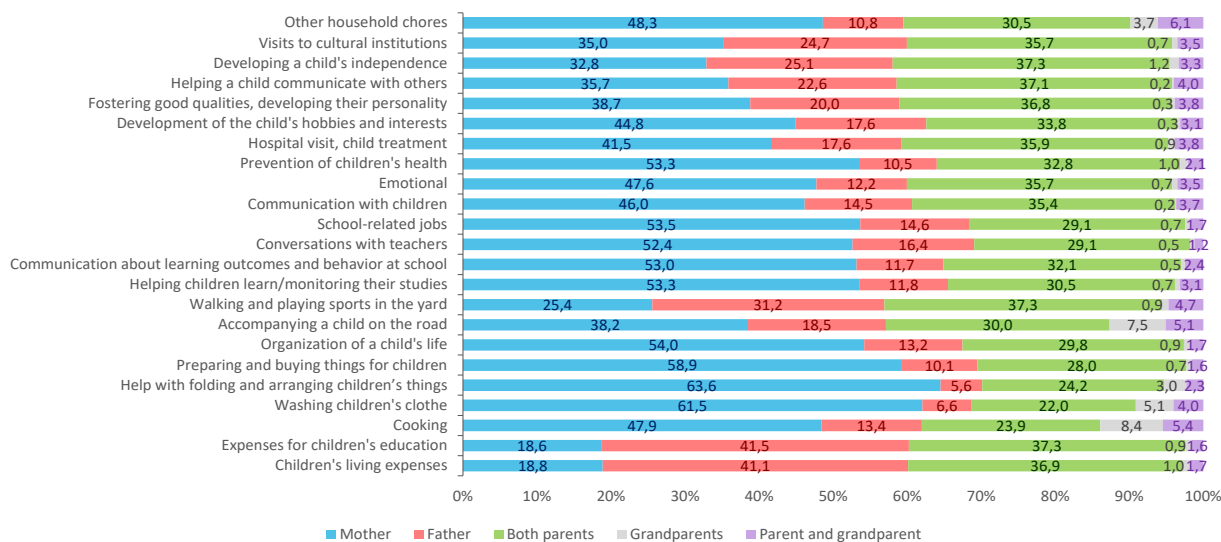
there were no differences between women with higher incomes than their husbands and respondents whose income was about the same as their husbands' income.

To study the specifics of the division of parental labor according to its functions and content, the respondents were divided into two groups according to the age of the child: 0–6 years and 7–15 years. Based on this, we conducted an analysis of the content of parental labor performed by different actors (*Fig. 1, 2*).



**Figure 1. Share of actors performing various functions of parental labor (for children aged 0–6 years), %**

Source: survey results.



**Figure 2. Share of actors performing various functions of parental labor (for children aged 7–15 years), %**

Source: survey results.

Figure 1 shows that mothers are primarily responsible for fulfilling the following responsibilities: putting the child to sleep (62.6%); folding and arranging children's clothes (56.9%); preparing and buying things for the child's daily life or studies (55.1%); hygiene and cleanliness of the child (washing the child, changing diapers, etc.; 55.8%); washing children's clothes (51.4%); organization of the child's life, for example, making daily routines, leisure activities, etc.; 49.6%).

The top 5 responsibilities that the fathers mainly deal with are: expenses for children's education (37.1%); living expenses for children (35.8%); walking and playing sports in the yard with children (29.1%); helping children communicate with others, building relationships with others (22.3%); playing with children (22.1%).

Among the various types of parental labor, only the following duties are performed by fathers to a greater extent than by mothers: expenses for children's education, expenses for children's accommodation and walking with children. In addition, the share of mothers exceeds the share of fathers in all other responsibilities, especially in the field of day-to-day care and accompanying children.

Figure 2 proves that more than half of mothers are primarily responsible for the following responsibilities for caring for children aged 7–15: assistance in folding and arranging children's clothes (63.6%); washing children's clothes (61.5%); preparing and buying things for daily life or children's studies (58.9%); organizing the child's life, for example, the organization of daytime schedules, leisure activities, etc.; 54%); completing assignments from school teachers, participating in school activities (53.5%); helping children with learning / monitoring homework and child's studies (53.3%); prevention of children's health (vaccinations, regular medical examinations; 53.3%); communication about learning outcomes and behavior at school (53%); conversations with teachers (52.4%).

The top 5 responsibilities that fathers of children aged 7–15 are mainly engaged in are: expenses for children's education (41.5%); living expenses for children (41.1%); walking and playing sports in the yard with children (31.2%); developing the child's independence (25.1%); visiting with children cultural institutions and cultural events (24.7%).

Among the various types of parental labor, only the following duties are performed by fathers to a greater extent than by mothers: expenses for children's education, expenses for children's accommodation and walking with children. In addition, the share of mothers exceeds the share of fathers in all other responsibilities, especially in the field of daily child care and support, only in the field of child personality development the share of fathers approaches the share of mothers.

At both stages of child care and upbringing, the share of parents doing all the labor together is mostly from one quarter to one third. Among the types of activity performed by maternal grandparents, grandmothers are mainly engaged in daily care, upbringing, emotional support, etc., while grandfathers are responsible for the living and education costs of children, play with them, play sports with their grandchildren, and develop the child's personality.

In addition, we found out who is in charge when making decisions on important issues for children (parenting methods, school choice, education), as well as on issues related to everyday life (nutrition, clothing style, leisure activities). The results of the study show that important issues in the majority of respondent families (61.4%) are discussed by parents together, and decisions about children's daily lives are made by the mother alone in more than half of cases (51.6%), and in both cases the proportion of decisions made only by the father is relatively small (9.4 and 7.2%). In matters of parenting, the mother's decision may be preferable. The reasons for this are diverse, such as the lack of involvement of fathers or the fact that mothers have more say than fathers in matters concerning their children.

Based on the nature of parental labor, all these functions were classified into the following groups: economic support functions, daily child care functions, educational and emotional support functions. Economic support includes ensuring children's access to education and an acceptable quality of life. Daily care includes routine labor (cooking, feeding, bedtime, washing clothes, etc.); organizational activity (organizing the child's life, playing and walking with him); therapeutic and preventive activity related to the safety and health of children. The function of educational support is divided into training, education of personal and social qualities. Personal education includes the formation and development of a child's personality and good habits; social education – communication with others, participation in social activities; education contains everything related to the

child's education in educational institutions, as well as speech and reading instruction at a young age, homework control and tutoring at an older age. The emotional support included communication with children, the child's emotional development.

*Table 3* shows the distribution of actors responsible for various functions of parental labor.

According to the data obtained, in the intra-family division of labor, the mother most often performs routine functions, is responsible for therapeutic and preventive measures and the education of children, which is part of the function of care and education. Among the functions performed by fathers, the most important is financial. In addition, both parents often perform an educational function together and provide for the children financially.

**Table 3. Main actors of parental labor in terms of its functions, % of the number of responses**

Category/actor	Share of actors of parental labor						
	mother	father	both parents	grandparents	Parents and grandparents	babysitter/ housekeeper	total
Child's age: 0–6 years old							
Financial support function	19,6	<b>36,7</b>	<b>37,4</b>	1,4	4,8	-	100
Daily child care functions							
Routine	<b>51,2</b>	9,2	25,9	6,1	6,9	0,8	100
Organizational	35,1	<b>21,6</b>	33,7	1,7	7,9	-	100
Therapeutic and preventive measures	<b>43,0</b>	14,2	35,5	1,3	6,0	-	100
Educational support							
Fostering personal qualities	39,3	15,8	<b>36,9</b>	0,4	7,6	-	100
Socialization	31,8	<b>21,7</b>	<b>38,0</b>	0,5	8,0	-	100
Training	<b>44,2</b>	16,1	32,7	0,9	6,0	0,1	100
Emotional support	39,8	15,1	35,9	1,3	7,8	-	100
Child's age: 7–15 years old							
Financial support function	18,8	<b>41,4</b>	<b>37,2</b>	1,0	1,7	-	100
Daily child care functions							
Routine	<b>54,3</b>	10,9	25,8	4,5	4,2	0,4	100
Organizational	39,9	<b>22,3</b>	33,7	0,9	3,2	-	100
Therapeutic and preventive measures	<b>47,6</b>	14,1	34,4	1,0	3,0	-	100
Educational support							
Fostering personal qualities	38,9	21,0	<b>36,1</b>	0,6	3,5	-	100
Socialization	35,5	<b>23,8</b>	<b>36,5</b>	0,4	3,8	-	100
Training	<b>53,3</b>	13,7	30,3	0,6	2,1	-	100
Emotional support	46,9	13,4	35,7	0,4	3,6	-	100
Source: survey results.							



## Conclusions

Based on the analysis, we can draw the following conclusions.

First, in the division of parental labor within Chinese families with children aged 0 to 15 years, the main actor of labor is the mother. Mothers spend more time caring for children than fathers, and take on more types of activity and responsibilities.

Second, it is important to evaluate the role of grandparents in the division of parental labor in the family. The vast majority of families need the help of grandparents in the implementation and performance of parental labor. We should also note that among intergenerational actors, share of women, i.e. grandmothers, is higher than that of grandfathers.

The entire content of parental labor in our study was presented through four groups of functions: the economic function, the function of daily care, educational and emotional functions. The economic function includes ensuring children's access to education and a normal quality of life. Daily care covers more types of activity, mainly routine labor (feeding, cooking, washing, etc.), labor on organizing leisure and entertainment for children, as well as therapeutic and preventive activity to ensure the health of the child. The educational function includes the upbringing of a child's personal qualities, socialization, and all functions related to learning. The emotional function focuses on the emotions and psychological health of children (for example, the emotional development of children, daily communication with the child, etc.). With regard to the division of the content of parental labor within the family between all actors, mothers perform more or almost half of the following functions: routine, training, and therapeutic and preventive. The three types of activity that parents mostly do together are socialization, economic support, and nurturing the child's personal qualities.

Fathers most often take on economic responsibilities from all functions, and for the rest they occupy a very small share compared to mothers.

Studying the actors of the intra-family division of labor and their characteristics helps us to conduct further analysis on this topic, including to study the relationship between the intensity of labor and different value orientations of parents, to analyze satisfaction with the division of labor within the family and its impact on the intimacy of family relations, including the relationship between parents and children, marital relations. The practical significance of the results obtained lies in the possibility of using them to develop more targeted and differentiated recommendations that promote a rational division of labor in the family. At the same time, they help to understand what kind of support can be provided to the family in the division of labor in terms of introducing social measures aimed at reducing pressure on families in the process of raising children. In our opinion, the recommendations and measures aimed at supporting this kind of government and government agencies include:

- possibility of compensating the labor costs of grandparents (especially for families with children under the age of three); this recommendation is related to the high level of grandparents' involvement in the care and upbringing of children identified in the study; for example, Russian scientists' research on grandparental labor proposed by compensating to stimulate this labor and the corresponding contribution to the development of the future human capital of the country and regions (Bagirova et al., 2022);

- share of parents sharing responsibilities for caring for children in the family; work aimed at weakening stereotypes about certain functions of this labor and society's biased attitude toward men caring for children; this, in turn, will help reduce the negative impact caused by a decrease

in satisfaction with distribution of parental labor on family stability and smooth the gender gap asymmetry in the distribution of parental labor;

- state propaganda through the dissemination of information through healthcare institutions in the form of booklets and memos for spouses preparing for pregnancy, pregnant women and parents of newborns about the care of pregnant women, the specifics of infant care, joint performance

and sharing of responsibilities related to child care;

- parents share knowledge in schools through specially organized events for parents and children (or for fathers and children to enhance interaction between them);

- organizing lectures and events for parents and children in the parent community, encouraging the exchange of parental labor experience between parents in children's care and upbringing.

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