

## Researchers asked moms what they really want for Mother’s Day. The answer is heartbreaking

Researchers at Rutgers Center for Women in Business asked 288 mothers to choose their ideal Mother’s Day gift.



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BY [Krystal Duarte](#) and [Lisa Kaplowitz](#)

Mother’s Day is Sunday, and it’s not too late to get that *perfect* gift for Mom—*time for herself*.

We conducted a survey through the [Rutgers Center for Women in Business](#) and asked 288 mothers to choose their ideal Mother’s Day gift from the following popular options: time for yourself, a family activity, or a physical gift, and then compared their responses to the 292 fathers we asked about Father’s Day.

Overall, most parents want to celebrate their day by spending time with their families, with 69% of mothers and fathers choosing a shared family activity as their ideal gift. While the concept sounds heartwarming, it is less heartwarming that nearly [40% of mothers report making their own Mother’s Day reservations](#), adding to her already long “to do” list.

However, a discrepancy emerged between what mothers and fathers wanted.

Our survey found that for parents of children under 18, this desire for “me” time is greater for mothers than fathers. We found the biggest difference is among parents with school-

aged children (ages 5–12): mothers are 2.4 times more likely than fathers to prefer time for themselves (41.7% mothers vs 17.6% fathers). By contrast, fathers are 1.5 times more likely to choose shared family activities (73.9% fathers vs 48.8% mothers). Physical gifts are the least popular option for both groups.

We found that mothers reported significantly less free time (less time to rest and fewer chances to recharge) than fathers, and unsurprisingly mothers who reported less free time were significantly more likely to want time for themselves.

In fact, parents, especially mothers, with young children (ages 0-4) reported having 1.5 times less free time than parents with adult children, highlighting just how demanding the early years of caregiving can be, especially for mothers.

Mothers' work status also shaped how much free time they felt they had. Full-time working mothers reported having the least amount of free time and were the most likely to say the best Mother's Day gift would be time for themselves, especially working mothers with children under 13.

Interestingly, stay-at-home mothers reported having significantly less free time than part-time working mothers. In other words, stepping away from paid work did not necessarily create more personal time.

What mattered even more was how fairly labor was distributed at home. Mothers who perceived household and caregiving responsibilities as unfairly distributed reported substantially less free time regardless of employment status.

This is often a sign that one parent, [often the mother](#), has become the [default](#) parent: the person who remembers appointments, tracks schedules, anticipates problems and keeps the day moving.

Unlike a to-do list, this unpaid [work is invisible, boundaryless, and continuous](#). It spills into paid work, into leisure, even into sleep. Even when mothers do have time off, it typically isn't fully their own and is quite often interrupted, shared with children, or spent multitasking. In other words, "free time" doesn't always feel free, and research shows it produces a [leisure gap](#) where mothers have less leisure time than fathers.

As one mother put it, she wants *"to have time where I don't have to make decisions; [that] would be priceless."*

Unfortunately, most mothers do not expect to get the gift of time this Mother's Day, especially those with younger children. Only about 1 in 10 mothers with children under the age of four expect the gift of "free time," even though almost three times as many report wanting it. Mothers with school children (ages 5-12) have it slightly better: 17% expect to

receive time for themselves, but more than twice report wanting it. In other words, it's not just that mothers want a break, many don't see it as a realistic possibility.

### **The Perfect Gift**

These findings point to a clear conclusion: mothers want, and need, more time for themselves.

[Gender scripts](#) tell mothers it's their job to hold everything together at home and these expectations persist even when women are the primary [breadwinners](#).

Therefore, it should be no surprise that mothers look forward to Mother's Day to take a break from being a mom, a job she likely loves but also [burns her out](#).

That's why more moms are calling for something different this Mother's Day: a "[momcation](#)."

Not just time away, but relief from the clock and from the constant mental tracking that controls her day.

When the demands never stop, *time* itself becomes the *perfect* Mother's Day *gift*. Unfortunately, it seems it is the hardest one to give her and the one she will least likely receive.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Krystal Duarte, PhD, is a social psychologist whose research examines gender, competition, collaboration, and workplace dynamics. Her work integrates evolutionary and organizational psychology to understand how social norms shape women's professional experiences. [More](#)

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