

Mothers' Employment Works for Children

Study Finds No Long-Term Damage

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A comprehensive, multi-year study released yesterday concludes that mothers who work outside the home are not harming their children.

The research, published in the March issue of the journal *Developmental Psychology*, assessed the behavior, academic achievement and psychological health of more than 6,000 children and found no permanent negative effects caused by their mother's absence. In some cases, the study found, children may be helped by the income their mothers bring in.

Experts say the new research, conducted by University of Massachusetts psychologist Elisabeth Harvey, supports what other similar studies increasingly indicate: that the quality of family life generally, including the mental stability and maturity of parents, is vastly more important in determining how children fare in life than the question of whether their mothers are employed.

"A number of studies are now suggesting that if the quality of parenting at home is good, having a working mother doesn't hurt children," said Andrew Cherlin, a sociologist at Johns Hopkins University. "It doesn't seem to be the case that a parent has to be with a child all day long for that child to develop successfully."

The study comes at a time of intense political and social debate about the effect of working mothers, long hours of day care and fast-paced family life on a generation of children. While its findings may help ease the concern of millions of working parents, it is unlikely to diminish the strong ambivalence Americans feel on the subject, with many convinced that young children do better when a parent stays home full time.

Recently, the strains on modern families have taken on political saliency. In a budget proposal this week aimed at helping working parents afford child care, President Clinton included a tax credit to ease the financial burdens of stay-at-home parents, something Republicans had called for last year.

But even as lawmakers attempt to embrace both versions of modern family life, the vast majority of mothers—70 percent—are working outside the home, and 10 million children under the age of 5 have employed mothers. That creates a ready audience for academic research on whether those children are suffering intellectually or emotionally because their mothers are not at home during the day.

The study released yesterday attempts to resolve some of the conflicting evidence on the subject. Previous research on the same group of children had found both positive and negative effects of having a working mother.

Harvey, who set out to examine the long-term effects of maternal employment in the first three years of a child's life, analyzed data collected in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), a huge study of 12,000 people interviewed each year since 1979. For this study, she looked specifically at information about the children of the women surveyed in NLSY. Those children were between 3 and 12, from both one- and two-parent families. They were assessed every two years from 1986 to 1994.

It is possible, Harvey concluded, that having both parents work may carry both positive and negative consequences for children that counteract each other. But ultimately, she wrote, "no consistent evidence of substantial effects of early parental employment on children's later development was found."

Harvey looked at several variables, including how soon a mother returned to work after having her child, how many hours weekly she was employed and whether there were periods of unemployment interspersed with working. She then assessed whether there was an effect on children's behavior, intellectual development, self-esteem and academic achievement. The assessments were based on a variety of standardized tests and, in some cases, reports from parents.

Overall, Harvey found that children whose mothers worked during the first three years after giving birth were not significantly different from those with unemployed mothers.

On one measure—children's compliance and temperament—Harvey found that 3- and 4-year-olds whose mothers stayed at home longer after birth were slightly more compliant than those who returned to work sooner. But the differences between the two groups of children were slight and disappeared by the time the children reached age 5 and 6.

Children whose mothers worked more hours scored slightly lower on academic achievement and vocabulary tests. But again, the differences were small and disappeared by the time the children turned 7.

The study also found that children were not affected by having their fathers work in the early years after birth.

The conclusion that children are not harmed by having a working mother is not without controversy. Pennsylvania State University psychologist Jay Belsky, for example, found in a 1988 study that the infants whose mothers worked more than 20 hours weekly had more emotional problems.

But the new study falls in line with more recent research on the effects of child care.

Sarah Friedman, who coordinates a long-term study by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, said that generally,

"we're not finding much in terms of negative effects" from child care.

Her study, however, has found that the quality of child care can affect a child's language and cognitive development.

That, combined with other studies showing that most child care in the United States is of poor quality, worries parents and policymakers.

"Parents want to be sure their children are getting good care," Cherlin said. "They fear bad care, and it's true, bad care hurts."

Staff writer Edward Walsh contributed to this report.

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