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Working Mothers: Cognitive and Behavioral Effects on Children

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ABSTRACT

Children face several cognitive and behavioral effects that are the result of maternal employment during their early developmental years. In this study, a questionnaire was distributed to thirty-two participants (twenty-eight female, four male) ranging in age from twenty-six to fifty-nine years. All participants had at least one child. Participants provided information about themselves, their spouse (when applicable), and their children, as well as their and their spouse's work. Several cognitive and behavioral differences were noted between children of working and nonworking mothers. Differences were found in school performance, participation in extracurricular activities, and abnormal behavioral issues.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history women have been regarded as the weaker gender, both physically and intellectually. As a result women's roles tended to center around the home and raising children. Over time women have gradually entered the workforce and have gained increasingly prestigious positions. With more women currently in the workforce than ever before, fewer children are being raised by stay-at-home mothers and more are spending prolonged hours at childcare facilities. This exploratory study analyzed the cognitive and behavioral effects on children, in small Midwestern communities, that result from having mothers in the workforce during children's early developmental years.

Seventy-one percent of American mothers with children under the age of eighteen are in the labor force, meaning that they are either employed or are seeking employment (Health Resources and Services Administration, 2007). Not only are more mothers entering the workforce than ever before, but mothers are working longer hours. More hours spent on the job means fewer hours spent with children. This may lead to several cognitive and behavioral implications for children.

Children with working mothers are usually placed in group childcare, which results in them receiving less one-on-one attention and instruction. This may have significant cognitive effects later in childhood. Behavioral effects may also arise. A longitudinal study completed in 2001 found significant cognitive differences between children who had working mothers and children who had stay-at-home mothers. The study examined the effect of maternal employment early in a child's life on the child's behavioral and cognitive outcomes during elementary school. The researchers found that maternal employment in the first year of a

child's life had a negative effect on cognitive outcomes for the child by age three or four. These cognitive effects could still be seen by age seven or eight. Interestingly, the amount of time that mothers worked did not appear to affect cognitive outcomes, as no differences were found in children of mothers working part-time compared with mothers working full-time. The researchers also found a correlation between mothers working during a child's first year of life and behavioral problems by the child later in childhood (Han, Waldfogel, and Brooks-Gunn).

Mothers entering the workforce might also have a positive effect on children. Dual-earning families are able to provide much more for their children. With increased financial opportunities come increases in healthcare, nutrition, and educational opportunities. Researchers have found that mothers report many positive effects of working. A group of researchers at South Bank University examined what women felt were the effects on their family that arose because of their employment. Working mothers in the study felt that they were helping to meet the needs of their families by providing financially, but that on occasion their family relationships did suffer as a result of their employment. Many working mothers also felt that they were being good role models for their children. In addition, they felt that they highly valued what time they were able to spend with their children. Mothers informed the researchers that at times working had a negative impact on their children because after work mothers were sometimes too tired to interact as much with children as the children would have liked. Also, working sometimes got in the way of completing activities with children that mothers and children would have liked to do (Reynolds, Callender, and Edwards, 2003).

The decision to become a working mother or a stay-at-home mother is an important one. Giele (2008) surveyed and then interviewed female college graduates in the United States in an attempt to learn if certain characteristics made career women more likely to remain in the home after they became mothers. Giele found that homemakers felt that being a mother was their most important life role. In contrast, working mothers felt that careers were their main role and that family was an additional part of their lives that helped make life more meaningful.

Although profiling mothers is helpful in researching effects on children, examining both children's and mothers' perceptions of the mothers' employment is also important. A study by Nomaguchi and Milkie (2006) examined whether or not people's perceptions of their parents was affected by their mother's employment (or lack thereof) during their childhood. Regardless of hours worked, children of mothers who worked reported less discipline from their mothers than those whose mothers did not work outside the home. Those with working mothers also reported less support and more verbal assaults than those whose mothers did not work (Nomaguchi and Milkie, 2006).

In addition to differences in discipline and support that children receive, maternal employment may also affect school performance. A study by Gennetian, Lopoo, and London (2008) used statistics gathered in a survey of urban mothers to assess how mothers' working affected adolescents' school performance and participation in school-related activities. They found that children of stay-at-home mothers were more likely to have above average school performance. Children of working mothers were not more likely to perform poorly in school, but they were less likely to perform above average. Children of employed others were also found to be more likely to skip school than children of non-working mothers (Gennetian, Lopoo, and London, 2008).

METHODS

All information was obtained through the use of a three page questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed to thirty-two participants in the state of South Dakota and Minnesota between March 3 and March 14, 2010. The participants were from various communities including Avon and Springfield, South Dakota, and were selected only if they were a parent to at least one child. All participants were volunteers found in a variety of public settings including a grocery store, a restaurant, and a nursing home. Participants were asked if they were parents and then if they would complete a questionnaire. Participants had an unlimited amount of time to complete the questionnaire and were encouraged to ask questions if they found any part of the questionnaire to be unclear.

Participants in the study were asked a series of questions regarding their demographics, employment status, spouse, and children. They were asked their gender, age, number of children, ages and gender of children, and the employment status of their spouse. They were asked several questions regarding the amount of time they spend at work and the amount of work that they bring home. They were asked to report the impact that their work has on their child. They were also asked to provide opinions about different available forms of child care and the quality of child care that they feel their child receives. Participants also reported how many hours per week their child spends in out-of-home child care. The survey included questions about cognitive and behavioral issues that children may have experienced and school and extracurricular activity participation. Specifically, participants were asked to report how well their child performs in school (mostly A's, mostly B's, etc.), if they participate in extracurricular activities, if they choose to participate in extracurricular activities, and if they feel that their child has ever displayed abnormal behavioral problems. Participants were asked to explain their answers to each of these questions. Participants also reported the effect of their work on the support and discipline that their child receives.

RESULTS

Demographically, the participants in this study ranged in age from twenty-six to fifty-nine years and were all Caucasian. There were a total of twenty-eight female participants ranging in age from twenty-six to fifty-nine years and four male participants ranging in age from twenty-eight to fifty years.

Research findings revealed that only 12% of participants worked less than ten hours per week. 3% worked eleven to twenty hours per week, 15% worked twenty to thirty hours per week, and 40% worked thirty-one to forty hours per week. In addition, 30% worked more than forty hours per week.

Concerning the employment status of both the participants and their spouses, it was found that in 34% of cases one parent served as a full-time homemaker, while the other parent worked. 19% of participants reported working part-time and enrolling their child in daycare and 47% of participants reported working full-time and enrolling their child in daycare.

Research found that an overwhelming majority (85%) of participants brought home zero to five hours of work each week in addition to their on-site work. 6% of participants

reported six to ten hours, 6% reported eleven to fifteen hours, and 3% reported bringing home sixteen to twenty hours of work per week.

67% of participants in the study reported that their child currently attended out-of-home child care or had in the past. 33% reported that their child had never attended out-of-home care. Of children who attended out-of-home care, a majority (52%) spend between thirty-one and forty hours per week there. 24% spend twenty to thirty hours and 19% spend more than forty hours. 5% of children who attend out-of-home care spend less than five hours per week there.

100% of participants in the study reported that they considered family to be more important than work. 76% of parents with children attending out-of-home child care reported that their child received high-quality care, while 83% of parents who stay home with their child reported that they received high quality care. Also, 17% of stay-at-home parents reported that their child received medium quality care, while 24% of parents with children in out-of-home care reported medium quality care. No participants reported that their child received low quality care.

Participants also reported the impact on children of having working parents. Of parents whose children attend out-of-home care, 90% felt that their work had a positive impact on their children, while 5% felt that it had a negative effect, and 5% felt that it had no effect. Of parents who stayed at home with their children, 70% stated that it had a positive effect on children, while 10% reported a negative effect, and 20% reported no effect.

Regarding the effects of out-of-home care, differences were found in the amount of support and discipline children receive. As illustrated in Figure 1, 32% of participants reported that having their child in out-of-home care affected the support that their child received, while 68% reported that it did not. 50% of participants stated that out-of-home care affected the discipline their child received, while 50% reported that it did not.

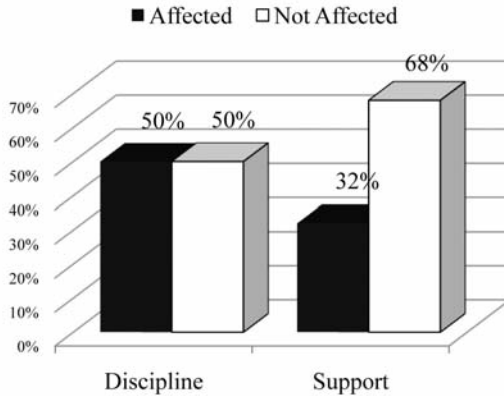


Figure 1: Affect of maternal employment on discipline and support that children receive as reported by working mothers

Differences were also found in children’s school performance between those who attended out-of-home care and those who did not. As illustrated in Figure 2, of those children

who did not attend out-of-home care, 40% were reported to perform above average in school, 40% were reported to perform between average and above average, and 20% were reported to perform at an average level. Of children who attended out-of-home care, 60% were reported to perform above average in school, 15% between average and above average, and 25% at an average level.

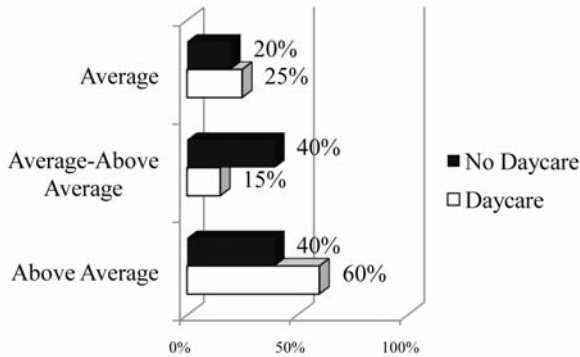


Figure 2: Differences in school performance in children as reported by working and stay-at-home mothers

Differences were found in participation in extracurricular activities. These differences are illustrated in Figure 3. Children who attended out-of-home care were more likely than those who stayed at home with a parent to participate in extracurricular activities. 90% of children who attended out-of-home care participated, while 83% of those who stayed at home with a parent participated.

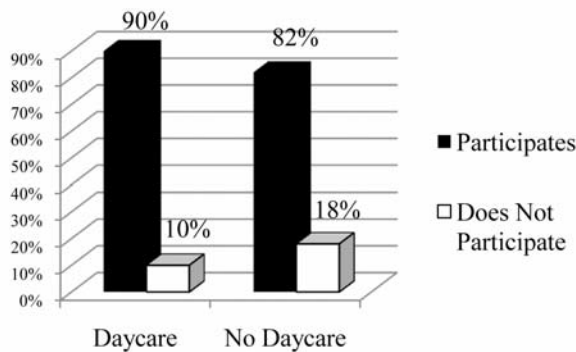


Figure 3: Children’s participation in extracurricular activities as reported by working and stay-at-home mothers

Regarding behavioral problems of children, as seen in Figure 4, differences were reported between children who attended out-of-home care and those who stayed at home with a parent. Of participants whose children attended out-of-home care, 42% reported behavior problems with their children. None of the parents who stayed at home with their children reported extraordinary problems with their children’s behavior.

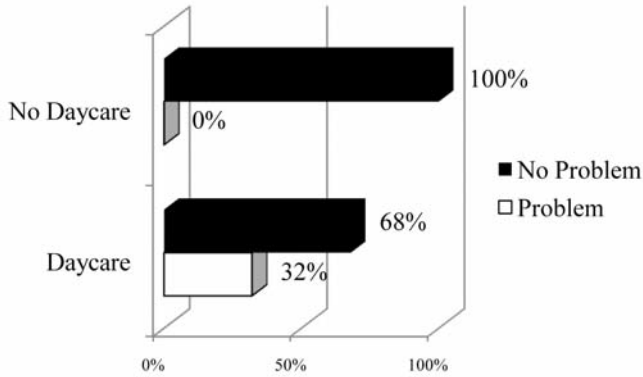


Figure 4: Behavior problems as reported by both working and stay-at-home mothers

DISCUSSION

Compared with earlier research, findings in this study were mixed, but in general they were fairly consistent with earlier findings. This study found that all mothers, both working and not, felt that family was always more important than work, while Giele (2008) found that working mothers felt that their careers were their main life role. This finding is interesting in that although all of the participants reported feeling that family was more important than work, they did not all report always putting family ahead of work.

Participants in this study reported several effects on their children that resulted because of their employment. The results of this study show that thirty-two percent of participants reported that the support their children received was affected by the use of out-of-home care. Also, fifty percent of participants reported discipline being affected. Similarly, Nomaguchi and Milkie (2006) found that children that attended out-of-home care received less discipline and less support from their mothers. These results are not surprising considering the amount of time worked by parents. In fifty-two percent of cases, both parents worked at least forty hours per week. Because so much time is spent working, it is likely that more discipline must be left to children’s caregivers and less to the parents. Also, although all of the participants stated that they felt family was more important than work, it is likely that children of parents who work many hours would feel they receive less support because they spend less time in the care of their parents.

This study also found that a majority of working mothers (seventy percent) felt that their employment had a positive impact on their child. In addition, ten percent felt that their employment had a negative effect and twenty percent felt it had no effect. Of stay-at-home mothers, ninety percent felt that not working had a positive effect on their children. Researchers at South Bank University found that working mothers reported both positive and negative impacts on their children. As the research shows, there are both positive and negative impacts of maternal employment. Many of the mothers in this study that reported working had a positive impact explained that if they did not work their families would likely face financial difficulties and their children would have less access to opportunities. Many also stated that they considered themselves to be positive role models for their children because they balanced work and family.

Although there were many positive implications attributable to maternal employment, this study also revealed some negative effects. For instance, in this study, none of the stay-at-home mothers reported behavior problems in their children, whereas forty-two percent of working mothers did report problems. Han, Waldfogel, and Brooks-Gunn (2001) found that maternal employment sometimes led to behavioral problems in children. This finding could be related to children being cared for by several people (both out-of-home care providers and parents). Children likely receive varying amounts and types of discipline in this situation, which could lead to confusion and ultimately behavior problems.

In addition to disciplinary differences, this study found that children of stay-at-home mothers were reported to not perform as well in school as children of working mothers. While sixty percent of working mothers reported that their children performed above average in school, only forty percent of stay-at-home mothers reported above average school performance. Gennetian, Lopoo, and London (2008) completed a study that examined school performance and participation in extracurricular activities. Unlike this study, their study found that children of stay-at-home mothers were more likely to have above average school performance. This study found that children who attended out-of-home care were more likely to participate in extracurricular activities, with ninety percent of children participating compared to eighty-two percent of children with stay-at-home mothers. These findings were consistent with those of Gennetian, Lopoo, and London and may indicate that children who attend out-of-home care might be more accustomed to social situations and therefore be more out-going and more likely to participate in extracurricular activities.

This study focused almost entirely on stay-at-home mothers. Future studies might consider stay-at-home fathers, which are becoming more commonplace, as a means of comparison to stay-at-home mothers. They might also include a larger sample size and a more extensive geographic area.

LIMITATIONS

Limitations to this study included, but are not limited to, small sample size, limited geographic area, lack of formal statistical analysis, and accuracy of participant's self-reports.

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