Maternal Employment and Child Well-Being

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Maternal Employment and Child Well-Being

• Maternal employment has risen sharply in recent decades
  – In 1968, 21% of mothers of infants worked; today it is 56%
• A large body of research links maternal employment to child well-being
• My goal: review what we know about maternal employment and child well-being
Trends in Maternal Employment


- With children ages 6 to 17
- With children under age 6
Percent of families with an employed mother

2011 Maternal Employment by age of youngest child

http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/surveymost?fm
Variation in Maternal Employment

• Work hours
  • Most work part-time, with hours increasing as children age; more advantaged mothers work longer hours (Ruhm, 2008)
Variation in Maternal Employment

- Nonstandard work
  - 12% of mothers work nonstandard schedules
  - More likely among minorities, those who are less educated
- Job churn
  - Median length on job in study of single mothers was 7 months
- Long commutes
- Long or irregular hours

(McMenamin, 2007; Johnson, Kalil, & Dunifon, 2012; Dunifon, Kalil and Bajracharya, 2007)
Why has maternal employment increased?

• Necessity
  – Welfare reform
    • 1996 legislation ended cash assistance for low-income single mothers
  – Economic climate
    • “Man-cession”

• Choice
  – Psychological and social benefits of working
  – Increases in women’s educational attainment
Result: Lots of research on maternal employment

- The connection between maternal employment and childhood obesity: Inspecting the mechanisms
- First-year maternal employment and child development in the first 7 years: III. What distinguishes women who work full-time, part-time, or not at all in the 1st year?
- Do working mothers raise couch potato kids? Maternal employment and children's lifestyle behaviours and weight in early childhood
- Maternal employment, migration, and child development
- Maternal employment, work schedules, and children's body mass index
- Does Maternal Employment Following Childbirth Support or Inhibit Low-Income Children's Long-Term Development?
- Maternal employment and child development
- Examining the relationship between maternal employment and health behaviours in 5-year-old British children
Why Focus on Mothers?

• We LOVE to talk about working mothers
• Sometimes lacking data on fathers
• Mothers spend more time on child care and housework than dads
  – Even in dual-career households (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer & Robinson, 2000)
• Working women do less at home, but not made up for by husbands (Cawley and Liu, 2012)
Why Would Maternal Employment be Linked to Child Well-Being?

• Child well-being is a function of time and money (as well as genes, temperament, etc.)
• There is a trade-off between these!
  – Money—used to purchase stuff (schools, medical care, educational toys, activities)
  – Time—quantity (direct investments), quality (the nature of interactions)
• Maternal employment linked to time and money investments
Evidence on Income

• Strong evidence that poverty is harmful for children
  – Linked particularly to cognitive outcomes (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan, 1997)
  – Early, persistent and deep poverty most harmful (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan, 1997)
  – Poverty before age 5 linked to adult outcomes (Duncan, Ziol-Guest and Kalil, 2010)

• Less evidence that, above a certain threshold, additional income benefits children
Evidence on Time Use

• Quantity of mothers’ of time
  – Hasn’t changed dramatically (Bianchi, 2000)
    • Less housework offsetting more time at work
    • Employed moms protect time with children (at the cost of housework, sleep, leisure)
  – Employed mothers spend less time with children
  – Fathers’ time is increasing but does not vary by maternal work
• Quality of mothers’ time
  – Warm, loving, consistent interactions beneficial for children (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000)
  – Parental stress is associated with less positive parent-child interactions (McLoyd et al., 1994; Conger et al., 1994)
  – Maternal employment could be linked to parental stress, direction unclear

• Children’s time
  – High quality child care can benefit children (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1997; Coley, Li-Grining, and Chase-Lansdale, 2006)
  – Lower quality care, or lack of care, can be harmful
    • Could be related to delinquency, TV time, poor eating, lower cognitive performance

• Where is a child spending time when a woman is at work, and what is the counterfactual?
Maternal Employment

Time
- Quality
- Quantity

Money

Child Well-Being

Money

Maternal Employment

Time
- Quality
- Quantity

Child Well-Being

Money

Maternal Employment

Time
- Quality
- Quantity

Child Well-Being

Money
Why Study Maternal Employment and Child Well-Being?

• Some think it generates guilt for working moms

• Question is not whether working is good or bad for kids, but rather to identify areas where policies or programs may be useful
The Policy Context

• U.S. is unique in providing very little support to working families (Waldfogel and McLanahan, 2011)
  – The only advanced country without paid parental leave
    • 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act provides 12 weeks of unpaid leave, only reaches 50% of employees (Ruhm, 2011)
  – No universal access to preschool
• Research can help change/address this (ideally)
Research

• Mostly drawn from large, national studies
• Child well-being
  – Behavior problems
  – Cognitive test scores/school success
  – Health (BMI)
• Mediators
  – Home environment
  – Maternal well-being
  – Children’s time use
Summary of Findings

• Strongest results link maternal employment to child BMI
  – Among more educated mothers
  – Full-time employment
  – In the elementary years (ages 6-10)
  – Not just in the U.S.
  – Not clear why
  • Eating behaviors, physical activity, TV time
  • Sleep may be key factor
Summary of Findings

• Less clear links between maternal employment and other outcomes

• Early maternal employment (first 1-3 years) linked to worse cognitive and behavioral outcomes (Brooks-Gunn, Han and Waldfogel, 2002; Ruhm, 2008)
  – These links strongest for more advantaged mothers (Ruhm, 2008)
    • May be due to lower quality home environment resulting from work
  – Effect sizes not huge

• Work intensity matters
  – Part-time work may be beneficial
Summary of Findings

• Work conditions matter
  – Those common to the low wage labor market
  – Night shift work, commute times, irregular work risk factors for children
    • In my study, many women commuted 80 minutes per day or more
    • 25% switched jobs 4 or more times
    • Night shift linked to adverse child outcomes, worse parenting
Implications

• This research can cause a backlash
    • “When I sent out a Twitter query on this topic, I received over 200 replies in under four hours. The majority of women told me that they liked work, had to work, would work even if they didn't have to work, often felt some level of working mother's guilt and dislike studies such as this because they are annoying, counterproductive and don't provide them with any practical solutions.”
Real Implications

• The vast majority of mothers work and will continue to do so
• This can create work-family conflict
  – Especially in very early years
  – Especially for less advantaged mothers
• The U.S. lags behind other countries in providing leave and child care
• Suggests a need to provide supports for working families
Take Home Messages

• Balancing work and family is difficult (duh)
• Those working nonstandard jobs, service jobs, or with long commutes may need particular help finding balance
  – How to maintain healthy family routines, effective parenting
• Those with very young children need support
• Stress management key, avoiding guilt
Take Home Messages

• Child BMI is an area of key concern, suggesting a need for
  – Emphasis on the importance of sleep
  – Strategies for providing healthy meals
  – Strategies for engaging in physical activity
• Let’s get dads more involved!
What Can We Do to Help Working Families?