This brief reviews recent research on the linkages between maternal employment and child well-being, and provides implications for policy and practice. Maternal employment has risen sharply in recent decades. Some women work in jobs that are unstable, require work outside of standard hours, or entail long commutes. A key question, then, is whether and how maternal work in general, and variations in maternal work experiences, might be linked to child well-being. Doing so can inform policies and programs designed to meet the needs of working families.

Trends in Maternal Employment

As shown in Figure 1, maternal employment has steadily increased since the 1970’s (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Figure 2 shows that, in recent years, employment has increased most dramatically among single mothers. Currently, the vast majority of mothers are in the labor force. Bureau of Labor Statistics numbers from 2011 show that:

- 71% of all mothers were employed
- 60.6% of mothers whose youngest child was under the age of three were employed, as were
- 76.1% of mothers whose youngest child was between the ages of six and seventeen.

Within this large group of working mothers, there is a great deal of variation.

- About 12% of working mothers work during nonstandard times, which means that their schedules do not fit the “traditional” 9-to-5 Monday through Friday work schedule (McMenamin, 2007); this type of work is common in jobs such as those in the hospitality or service industry, and occurs more often among less advantaged mothers.
- Job churn is common among some sub-groups of working mothers. A study of single mothers in Michigan found that while most women were able to obtain jobs, the typical woman stayed on a job for only about seven months at a time (Johnson, Kalil, & Dunifon, 2012).
- Many mothers experience long commutes and long or irregular work hours. Another study of single mothers in Michigan found that a large group of women commuted on average 80 minutes per day or more to get to work (Dunifon, Kalil, & Bajracharya, 2005).
Maternal employment has increased due to necessity and choice. The welfare reform policies of the 1990s ended cash assistance for low-income single mothers, as well as provided many incentives for women to go to work. As a result, and as shown above, many single mothers entered the labor force. The recent economic recession has been referred to as a “man-cession”, as the majority of lost jobs occurred among men (Mulligan, 2009). This means that women now make up a larger portion of the labor force than before, and may be the sole breadwinners in many households. Additionally, it is important to note that many mothers work due to choice. This is partially due to the financial, psychological and social benefits of working as well as an access to higher quality jobs, related to increases in women’s educational attainment.
Why Would Maternal Employment Influence Children?

There are several reasons why and how maternal employment might influence children. Researchers recognize that child well-being is a result of time and money investments made by parents. Money is needed to purchase items that are necessary for healthy development, such as school, medical care, educational toys, etc. Time investments in children can be broken down into two categories: (1) the amount of time spent with children, and (2) the quality of time, or what parents do with their children. As highlighted in Figure 3, maternal employment could be related to each of these investments in children.

- There is strong evidence that growing up in poverty is harmful for children (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Duncan, Ziol-Guest, & Kalil, 2010). On the other hand, there is not much evidence that above a very low threshold, additional income benefits children. Therefore, maternal employment could benefit children if it allows families to rise out of poverty.

- Maternal employment is also linked to time with children, if time spent working is time that would have been spent with children. Research indicates that women working outside of the home do spend less time with their children than those who do not; however, the differences are not large because employed mothers protect their time with their children at the cost of other time investments, such as housework, sleep and leisure activities (Bianchi at al., 2000).

- Fathers’ time with children has increased in recent decades; however, research shows that mothers still do more child-related work at home, regardless of their work status, and fathers do not alter their time with children to make up for time that mothers spend at work (Cawley & Liu, 2012). Therefore, maternal employment may be linked to reductions in time with children, especially if fathers do not “pick up the slack”.

- Maternal employment could also be linked to the quality of time with children. Research shows that warm, loving consistent interactions are beneficial for children, and that these interactions are less likely to occur when parents are stressed (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; McLoyd et al., 1994). If maternal employment increases parental stress due to the difficulties of balancing work and family, children may fare less well. On the other hand, if the financial and social benefits from work reduce parental stress, children may benefit.

- Finally, it is important to consider where children spend time when mothers work. Research has found that children benefit from high quality childcare (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1997; Coley, Li-Grining, & Chase-Lansdale, 2006). However, such care can be difficult to find and is costly. When studying the effects of maternal employment on children’s well-being, it is
important to look at where children spend their time when their mothers are at work and the quality of care in those settings.

Figure 3. The relationship between maternal employment, time, money and child well being.

What are the Linkages Between Maternal Employment and Child Well-Being?

Current research in the area of maternal employment and child well-being is primarily drawn from large, national studies in which families are interviewed repeatedly over a long period of time. Importantly, the vast majority of studies examine maternal employment, and ignore the employment experiences of fathers. This reflects the fact that, as noted above, mothers often have primary responsibility for child-oriented activities. Additionally, data on paternal employment is often not measured. However, the almost single-minded focus on maternal employment at the exclusion of fathers inherently narrows the research and can unfairly “point fingers” at mothers, rather than acknowledging that childrearing is the responsibility of fathers and others as well.

• The strongest body of research indicates linkages between maternal employment and higher Body Mass Index (BMI; a measure of weight-for-height) among children (Anderson, Butcher, & Levine, 2003; Morrissey, Dunifon, & Kalil, 2011; Ruhm, 2008). This is especially true for more-educated mothers (Anderson et al, 2003; Ruhm, 2008; Ziol-Guest, Dunifon, & Kalil, 2012).
  o Although the reasons for the linkages between maternal employment and child BMI are not fully-known, some evidence suggests that key factors may be increased TV viewing (Ziol-Guest, Dunifon, & Kalil, 2012), and reductions in sleep (Ziol-Guest, Dunifon, Morrissey, & Kalil, 2013) among children of working mothers.
• There is a less clear link between maternal employment and other measures, such as cognitive test scores, behavior, and school success. Some research suggests that early maternal employment in the first one to three years of a child’s life is linked to worse cognitive and behavioral outcomes (Brooks-Gunn, Han, & Waldfogel, 2002; Ruhm, 2008), particularly among more advantaged mothers (Ruhm, 2008). This may be due to the lower quality home environment resulting from parental absence.

• Finally, evidence suggests that some aspects of maternal work, such as night shift work, long commutes, job churn, and irregular work hours, are linked with higher behavior problems among children (Dunifon, Kalil, & Bajracharya, 2005; Dunifon, Kalil, Crosby, & Su, 2013; Johnson, Kalil, & Dunifon, 2012).

Maternal Employment in the Context of Policy

As noted above, the vast majority of U.S. mothers work. Therefore, the goal of research in this area is not to determine whether it is better for children for mothers to work vs. stay home. Rather, research on this topic can help identify areas where policies or programs may benefit working families. The U.S. lags behind other developed nations in providing supports to working parents in many ways. For example, the U.S. is the only developed country without paid parental leave (Ruhm, 2011). Additionally, in contrast to other counties, child care in the U.S. is privatized, very expensive, and highly variable in terms of quality (Ruhm, 2011). Each of these factors hinders families’ abilities to balance work and family in ways that benefit children. It is hoped that research in this area can address these gaps and point toward solutions.

Current research suggests the following take-home messages:

• The vast majority of mothers work, and the U.S. lags behind other nations in providing leave and child care. This highlights a need for supports for working families.

• Those with very young children, and those in less family-friendly jobs (requiring nonstandard work, long commutes, or with job instability) are in particular need of support.
  o This support could focus on maintaining health family routines and effective parenting under very difficult conditions, as well as stress management and avoiding guilt.
  o A key area could be focusing on reducing the linkages between maternal employment and child BMI.

• There is a need to get dads more involved in reducing the burden on mothers and promoting child health.
References


This work was supported by a joint research and extension program funded by Cornell University Agricultural Experiment Station (Hatch funds) and Cornell Cooperative Extension (Smith Lever funds) received from Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Rachel Dunifon is an Associate Professor in the Department of Policy Analysis and Management at Cornell University.
Lydia Gill is a Junior in the Department of Human Development at Cornell University.