

The kids are all right: Mother's work status not associated with children's achievement or behavior, study finds

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“We still have a long way to go in communicating ... that there are no great costs - or huge benefits - to maternal employment,” says UCI researcher Wendy Goldberg, professor of psychology & social behavior and education. Credit: Michelle S. Kim / University Communications

(PhysOrg.com) -- Working moms can stop feeling guilty: Research shows that children of women who return to work before their offspring turn 3 are no more likely to act out or fail at school than kids whose mothers are full time homemakers.

The findings, published in the American Psychological Association's Psychological Bulletin, stem from 50 years of data on maternal employment and academic performance. UC Irvine's Wendy Goldberg and JoAnn Prause conducted the analysis along with Rachel Lucas-Thompson of Macalester College, in Minnesota.

However, the outlook isn't entirely rosy for offspring of career-minded moms, specifically those who work full time during the first year of a child's life.

"We observed slight increases in problem behaviors, such as acting out, among children whose mothers were employed full time during their first year," says Goldberg, professor of psychology & social behavior and education.

Kids in financially secure families may not see as many advantages when mom works full time, but maternal employment can make a big difference in the lives of low-income youngsters.

"Children from poor families, such as those receiving public assistance, showed more benefits from having a working mother than did children in higher-income families because the boost in take-home pay could lead to more nutritious food, better housing, more books and other enrichment opportunities," Goldberg says.

Mothers who work also serve as positive role models for their [offspring](#), says Prause, senior lecturer in psychology & social behavior. "If an employed mom receives a promotion or praise at her job or feels satisfied with a job well done and comes home feeling energetic and positive, that could have a spillover effect on her kids," she says.

Researchers analyzed data from 69 studies conducted between 1960 and 2010 that measured early maternal employment status in relation to children's test scores, grades, intelligence-test results and teacher ratings of their cognitive abilities. They also looked at studies that assessed behavioral problems, including anxiety, withdrawal and aggression. Some of the reviewed studies contrasted full time and part time work, and some were longitudinal, following families for several years after the mothers returned to work, even into the kids' teen years.

“If you look at the big picture, the effects of maternal employment per se are small,” Goldberg says. “Behavior and academic achievement are not determined solely by a mom’s work status but are related to many things: genetics, neighborhoods, quality of schools.”

Early maternal employment raises issues of a child’s separation from its mother during formative years and the necessity for alternative care arrangements. The researchers note that all families might benefit from improved parental leave policies allowing mothers and fathers to stay home with infants longer without losing job security or income.

Prause and Goldberg hope their research helps dispel oft-repeated and widely believed myths about working motherhood.

Goldberg points to her recent work-and-family survey of about 1,000 UCI undergraduates. The students perceived more costs than benefits with maternal employment, citing its impact on a child’s ability to succeed academically and thrive emotionally. The study, coauthored with psychology & social behavior graduate students, is forthcoming in the *Journal of Social Issues*.

The responses were nearly identical to those of undergrads surveyed in the early 1980s by Goldberg and colleagues at UCI, including Professor Emerita Ellen Greenberger.

“We still have a long way to go in communicating to the generation now entering adulthood that there are no great costs to maternal employment,” Goldberg says. “It’s surprising to see how traditional they are in their views.”

Provided by University of California, Irvine

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