

Having children does not lead to more sickness absence

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Women with children are not more absent from work, do not receive more social insurance benefits and do not have higher mortality rates than most other employees. These findings are the result of a recent, comprehensive Norwegian study.

With funding from the Research Programme on Sickness Absence, Work and Health (SYKEFRAVAER) at the Research Council of Norway, researchers at the Ragnar Frisch Centre for Economic Research at the University of Oslo have studied the impact on [women's health](#) and sickness absence rates of having children. The research is based on large data registries from 1970 to 2010 in which information on almost all Norwegian women has been compiled.

The study's main conclusion was that having children does not increase women's rate of sickness absence in the short term or in the long term. Nor does it lead to increased payment of social insurance benefits or higher mortality rates among women.

"We have found nothing to indicate that having children has an adverse effect on women's health," states Simen Markussen, senior research fellow at the Frisch Centre.

Better health among mothers with little education

The researchers also uncovered an interesting difference between

women with high and low levels of education:

- Women with a lower level of education return to the workplace to a lesser degree after their children are born. This appears to give them [better health](#) in the long term.
- Women with a higher level of education return more often to work after their maternity leave ends. While this has no negative effect on their health, they do not reap the same post-childbirth health benefits experienced by many women with lower educational backgrounds.

"The transition to a life with small children is smoother for women with less education as opposed to those with more. This may be the reason why women with less education have better health in the long term."

A second shift for women?

Whereas women in the 1970s and 1980s increased their overall burden by combining unpaid caregiving tasks on top of working life, the struggle for gender equality has clearly led to results, both at home and in the workplace. Today, mothers have access to considerable assistance in relation to childcare, and men have taken on more of the household chores. In addition, the availability of day-care and after-school programmes has improved dramatically. New technology has also made housework an easier task.

Nonetheless, the second-shift hypothesis, as it is often called, is still often invoked to explain why women in Norway have nearly 70 per cent higher sickness absence than men.

"Our study has found no evidence to support the claim that the extra work [children](#) entail is the general cause of women's higher sickness absence. And viewed in isolation, we see that having a child in itself does

not increase [sickness absence](#) among women."

More information: Project database: Disentangling absence patterns:
www.forskningsradet.no/prosjek...eta/#/project/227103

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