

Research Briefing N° 70

The Myth of the Working Mother: evidence from longitudinal data

It has been commonly held that ‘children suffer if their mother goes out to work’. This research uses several studies – large scale longitudinal data – to look at the development of children whose mothers were employed when those children were very young.

Key words: working mothers; child development; longitudinal data; British Cohort Studies



Key findings

The research is of particular interest to parents, employers, early years professionals and other child-care givers.

- Among children assessed in Britain in the 2000s, educational or behaviour scores do not appear to be affected by whether or not their mothers had a paid job when they were babies. After allowing for other things, such as mother’s education, there was no significant difference, either way, between children whose mothers had gone out to work before their first birthdays and other children.
- As we look at earlier generations of children born between 1958 and 1992, there was some indication of adverse outcomes for children whose mothers returned early to employment, particularly full-time.
- Any adverse outcomes were more likely to involve verbal cognitive attainment rather than behavioural adjustment.
- Some of these earlier results have fuelled folklore about the dangers of mothers working.
- Yet, as mothers’ employment has gone up, researchers’ estimates of any negative impact on children have gone down.
- Families may also benefit from mothers’ earnings, better mental health and provision of a role model; and the facilities for combining parenthood and employment (leave and childcare) have also been transformed – attitudes of families, employers and the government towards mothers having paid work have changed.
- Mothers should not feel guilty whether they go out to work or not, but need support in managing their roles.

What we did

The question of what happens to children whose mothers go out to work has generated interest and worry over the years, and is one of the many questions large-scale longitudinal data helps us to answer. Longitudinal data is useful as it is able to follow people over a long period of time against a backdrop of social change, rather than at isolated points in time. The following questions were addressed using data from a series of British longitudinal studies:

- Does the employment of mothers of pre-school children have an adverse effect on children's subsequent development? Can differences between the children of working and non-working mothers be accounted for by other factors?
- Do cognitive and behavioural outcomes move in the same direction?
- Does the labour market and policy context matter?

Several studies took evidence relating mothers' employment in their children's early years and then followed the children to an age where they were old enough for their development to be rated. There are various different indicators of the children's wellbeing, behaviour or academic achievement, which have been taken at a range of ages from 4 upward. These findings are summarised in the table below.

Table 1: The association of mother's employment with a preschool child and outcomes for children at a later age: estimates from UK longitudinal sources

Birth Dates	Child's age at		What was assessed and Result		Data source
	Mum's Job	Child Outcome			
2000-1	0	5	4 cognitive and behavioural scores. No significant difference between working and other mothers.	a	The 2000 Millennium Cohort Study (MCS)
2000-1	0,3	5	Socio-emotional behaviour. No significant difference between working and other mothers.	b	The 2000 Millennium Cohort Study (MCS)
mainly 1990s	0	4-16	4 (other) cognitive and behavioural scores. No significant difference between working and other mothers.	c	Children of the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70), surveyed in 2004
1991-2	0-2	7	Literacy: Small shortfall if mother's job full-time	d	Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents And Children
mainly 1980s	0, 1-4	4-17 1991	Small shortfall on reading (2% points) (job at age 0)	e	Children of the 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS), surveyed in 1991
1970s	0-5	18+	Qualifications. Small shortfall if mother's job full-time	f	British Household Panel Survey (began in 1991)
1970	0-4	26	Qualifications. Small shortfall (0.1 out of top score 4)	g	1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70)
1958	0-4	7	Reading: 3 month delay; Maths: 1 month delay. Both if mother's job full-time. Social adjustment: No significant difference	h	1958 Birth Cohort National Child Development Study

How we did it

The longitudinal data sources include all four national birth cohorts whose members were born in 1946, 1958, 1970 and 2000, two studies of their offspring, the cohort recruited in the Bristol area in 1991-2, and the British Household Panel study. All the studies reviewed link employment at one point with child outcomes at a later point. They control for other factors, such as mother's education, which may influence both the mothers' work and the child's outcomes. The second generation studies are also able to control for the mothers' own childhood scores. The exercises using children of the 1958 and 1970 cohorts, and the British Household Panel Study, look at more than one child per mother where available. Importantly the studies differ in that they took place over a period when maternal employment and policies to support it changed considerably.

Implications

Government and private sector policies about maternity, paternity and parental leave, and the right to request flexible employment, which were given a push by New Labour (1997-2010), are still

in progress on the Coalition's agenda (in office since May 2010). They are informed by the accumulating research evidence even if not specifically linked to it.

Overall, based on evidence from the research, it seems safe to argue that worries about the working mother harming her children can be put to rest if we consider how the environment surrounding the balancing of work and life has changed. Not only have there been changes in maternity leave, employment flexibility and childcare provision, but the private and public policy framework has also been moving towards a greater role for fathers sharing the adaptations to work hours and employment.

However, one cannot be certain that the absence of significant findings in the 21st century studies means no child is harmed by any maternal employment or that these policies are yet optimal. We do not yet know how these children will fare through adolescence, or that the mothers who stay at home are a perfect comparison for what would happen if the working mothers hypothetically stayed at home, and vice versa.

Further information

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