

The kids are all right: Few negative associations with moms' return to work after having children

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Children whose mothers return to work before their offspring turn 3 are no more likely to have academic or behavioral problems than kids whose mothers stay at home, according to a review of 50 years of research.

"Overall, I think this shows women who go back to work soon after they have their children should not be too concerned about the effects their employment has on their children's long-term well-being," said psychologist Rachel Lucas-Thompson, PhD, lead author of the study conducted with Drs. JoAnn Prause and Wendy Goldberg at the University of California, Irvine"..

For some families, having a mom on the job is better for children, according to the meta-analysis of 69 studies conducted between 1960 and 2010. For example, children from single-parent or low-income families whose mothers worked had better academic and intelligence scores and fewer [behavioral problems](#) than children whose mothers did not work, the authors found. This was probably due in part to increased resources that the income afforded, they said. The findings appear online in [Psychological Bulletin](#), published by the American Psychological Association.

"This is the first comprehensive and systematic look at maternal employment during children's early years and what effect it has on children, specifically in the area of [school performance](#), intelligence and

behavioral problems," said Lucas-Thompson, PhD, of Macalester College in St. Paul, Minn. "For years, there has been a lot of debate in this area of research and now we can see more clearly for which families there are positive or negative associations with having a mom who works." Lucas-Thompson conducted the study along with JoAnn Prause, PhD, and Wendy Goldberg, PhD, at the University of California, Irvine.

Children in poorer families may benefit more from having a working mother because the added income helps to reduce the child's stress and leads to more opportunities, according to Lucas-Thompson. In addition, she said, the mothers become positive role models for their children.

The analysis included studies where the mother returned to work, either part-time or full-time, within three years of giving birth. To be considered, the studies had to measure school performance through achievement test scores, school grades, intelligence test scores and teacher ratings of cognitive abilities. Behavioral problems were assessed by children's "internalizing behaviors," such as anxiety and withdrawal; and "externalizing behaviors," such as aggression and conduct problems. Behavioral problems were reported by parents, teachers or the older children themselves. Many of the studies were longitudinal, meaning the researchers followed families for several years after the mothers went back to work – even into the children's adolescent years.

Further analyses suggested that children in middle- and upper-class families with two parents were slightly more likely to see decreases in achievement later on. In addition, slight increases in externalizing behaviors were evident later on if the mother went back to work full-time during the first year of the child's life. "This suggests that families who are not struggling financially may not see as many benefits of maternal employment on very young children," said Lucas-Thompson. "For these families, it's possible that alternate care arrangements may not be as emotionally supportive as the child's mother."

Lucas-Thompson said these latter findings help support the calls for more flexible and generous maternity leave policies. "Our country does not compare very well with other developed countries that are better at supporting new parents," she said. "If parents could postpone work or if they were allowed to work fewer hours during that first year, I think it could only have positive effects on our [children](#)."

Despite the fact that this analysis included studies conducted over a half-century, beginning at a time when fewer [mothers](#) worked outside the home, there were no significant differences in the findings based on the year the studies were published.

More information: "Maternal Work Early in the Lives of Children and Its Distal Associations With Achievement and Behavior Problems: A Meta-Analysis," Rachel G. Lucas-Thompson, PhD, Macalester College; Wendy A. Goldberg, PhD and JoAnn Prause, PhD, University of California, Irvine. *Psychological Bulletin*.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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