

Work-family conflict hits home

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Researchers have long known that sick children can affect a company's bottom line, as employees are distracted or have to take time off to care for their children. Far less is known about the impact a parent's work life has on their children's health.

In a paper published in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, researchers report that [children's health](#) is less likely to be negatively affected when their parents feel a sense of control over their work lives.

"If you can decide how you are going to do your job, rather than having that imposed on you, it is better for [children](#)," said co-author Christiane Spitzmueller, professor of industrial organizational psychology at the University of Houston.

The good news, she said, is that there are things organizations can do to provide employees with that sense of control.

In addition to Spitzmueller, who also is managing director of the Center for ADVANCING UH Faculty Success, authors include first author Eugene Agboifo Ohu of the Lagos Business School in Lagos, Nigeria; Jing Zhang of California State University-San Bernadino; Candice L. Thomas of St. Louis University; Anne Osezua of the Institute for Work and Family Integration; and Jia Yu of the University of Houston.

The researchers collected data from both parents and children in Lagos, Nigeria, targeting one group of low-income families and a second group of more affluent families. Teenage children from both groups were surveyed at their schools and asked to assess their own health.

Spitzmueller said the researchers expect their findings to be applicable in the United States, as the more affluent families had education levels, incomes and expectations of family life that are similar to those in western nations.

While the low-income group included people living in dire poverty, she noted that their responses did not differ markedly from those of the wealthier group. "Economic resources were not as much of a buffer as we would have thought," she said.

Instead, feelings of autonomy in the workplace accounted for the difference between families where the parents' work-family conflicts played out in health problems for the children and those whose children fared better.

The researchers look at so-called "self-regulatory resources," or the amount of self-control parents bring to parenting, including the ability to act in a more reflective manner.

"If a parent has too many stressors, it reduces your self-control," Spitzmueller said. Parental self-control was linked to better health outcomes for children. In other words, how we parent when we experience high levels of stress is probably fundamentally different from how we parent when we are coping well.

"At lower levels of job autonomy," the researchers wrote, "employees likely have to rely more on self-regulatory resources to compensate for the impact of limited control over one's job on one's personal life. At higher levels of job autonomy, freedom and more decision-making opportunities are likely to motivate the person to engage; however, self-regulatory resources would be less needed."

The impact was most pronounced when job demands are high and job autonomy is low, and Spitzmueller said that allows for potential interventions and policies to address the issue.

Some are relatively simple, including teaching parents to take a few minutes to recharge before plunging from the workplace into parenthood. Practicing mindfulness, Spitzmueller said, can allow parents to "replenish their resources."

Businesses and organizations can play a role, as well. Although the researchers say their findings are just the start of understanding how

parental stressors affect children's well-being, they also encourage workplace interventions aimed at promoting job autonomy.

Managers and supervisors can be trained to more effectively deal with their employees and to encourage a greater sense of autonomy, Spitzmueller said.

Provided by University of Houston

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