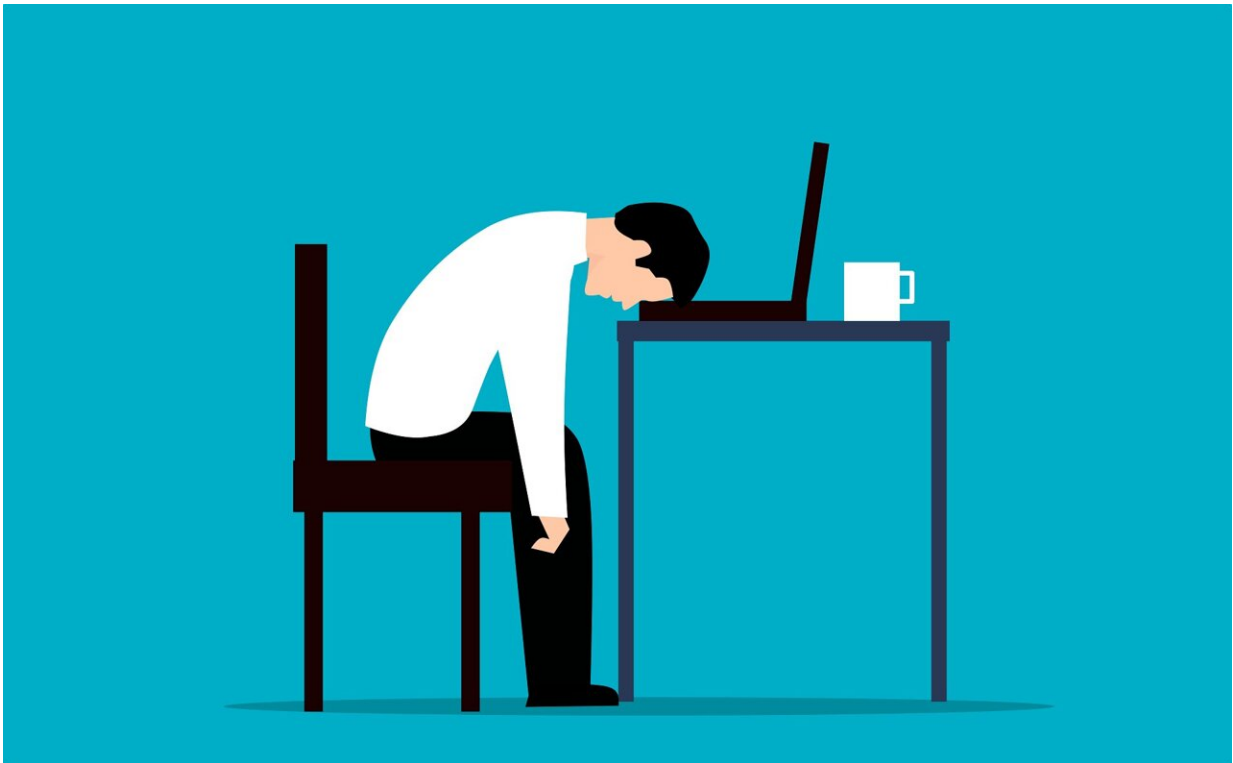


How parents' work stress affects family mealtimes and children's development

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Family mealtimes are important for parents and children as a space to communicate, socialize, and build attachment relationships. But it can be difficult for busy parents to balance family and work life. A [new study](#) from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign explores how parents'

job stress influences their attendance at family mealtimes, and in turn, children's socioemotional development.

"We all struggle to maintain the balance between [work life](#) and [family life](#). But this might be especially challenging for parents, who are engaging in childcare after a busy and stressful day at work. And when it comes to co-parenting in dual-earner families, which comprises 65% of families with [children](#) in United States, we do not know much about how mothers and fathers share caregiving roles under work stress," said lead author Sehyun Ju, doctoral student in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS) in the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences (ACES) at U. of I.

The study included data from more than 1,400 dual-earner families, consisting of heterosexual married couples with children, in a nationally representative survey that traced children's development across family, home, [child care](#), and school environments from 9 months to kindergarten. The researchers focused on the interplay of child characteristics, [family mealtimes](#), and parents' job and financial dissatisfaction.

"We found that children of parents who expressed higher work-related stress when the children were 2 years old had lower socioemotional competency at age 4 to 5, measured by lower positive and higher negative social behaviors," Ju explained.

There were significant differences regarding the impact of mothers' and fathers' work stress. For mothers, higher job dissatisfaction did not impact frequency of family mealtimes; however, it was directly associated with lower socioemotional competency in their children.

On the other hand, fathers who had higher job and financial dissatisfaction were less likely to attend family mealtimes with their

children, and this in turn resulted in the children having lower socioemotional competency at age 4 to 5.

"Even when the mother increased her mealtime presence to compensate for the father's absence, the child's socioemotional development was still negatively impacted. This indicates fathers may have a unique influence that cannot be replaced by the mother. Future intervention programs should help both parents obtain a better balance between work and family, and highlight the importance of family routines to promote healthy child development," stated co-author Qiujie Gong, a doctoral student in HDFS.

The findings speak to the pervasiveness of traditional gender roles, added Karen Kramer, associate professor in HDFS and co-author on the study. "Mothers are considered primary caregivers, and they are expected to be present and feed their children no matter what. The study showed they didn't adjust their mealtime frequencies in response to job dissatisfaction as fathers did."

Kramer notes the study is unique in combining topics from different disciplines, including psychology, sociology, economics, and nutrition, and connecting them in a holistic way that provides insights for policy measures.

"We have to acknowledge the challenges that families face in creating consistent routines. It's not just an outcome of individual influences. Outside factors, such as parents' work environment and financial situation can affect their interactions, mealtimes, and child development. For example, dinner time for [young kids](#) is typically around five or six o'clock, but the expectation that parents are home early in the day doesn't align with being an ideal worker."

"Policy initiatives to help provide a work environment and [community](#)

[support](#) that facilitate [family](#) mealtimes would be important," Kramer concluded.

The research is published in the *Journal of Family Psychology*.

More information: Sehyun Ju et al, Association of parents' work-related stress and children's socioemotional competency: Indirect effects of family mealtimes., *Journal of Family Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1037/fam0001147](#)

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