

Parents' demanding jobs put children's mental health at risk

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Jobs that are overly demanding at the expense of family time put the mental health of employees' children at risk, a new study led by ANU has found.

The researchers said the study, which involved La Trobe University in Melbourne, underlined the need for employers and policymakers to promote a healthy work-life balance.

The study observed around 2,500 working couples and their [children](#) over 10 years as part of the "Growing Up in Australia" research project.

Lead researcher Dr Huong Dinh from ANU said children were at the highest risk when both [parents](#) experienced conflict between their job and [family](#) time, and this most often happened if they worked in jobs with heavy workloads, long hours and job insecurity.

She said six out of 10 working couples had at some time struggled to manage work and family commitments, and one in seven experienced prolonged periods when one parent was not managing these commitments well.

"When parents struggle to juggle family and work responsibilities, they become tired, stressed, cranky and unhappy, which has an impact on family relationships and their children's wellbeing," Dr Dinh said.

"We show that when employment and family are in conflict with each other, this undermines the health of both parents and their children - and this occurs when either fathers or [mothers](#) are in very demanding or inflexible [jobs](#)."

Co-researcher Professor Lyndall Strazdins from ANU said this was one of the first studies to show that a parent's work-life imbalance affected their children's mental health, which was reported on by the parent who knew the child best - mostly mothers.

She said the reports included an assessment of children's emotional symptoms, behavioural problems, hyperactivity or inattention, and

relationships with peers.

"The onset and persistence of conflicts between parents' work and family life led to greater mental health problems in children, including withdrawal and anxiety, compared to children of parents with little or no work-life challenges," said Professor Strazdins from the ANU Research School of Population Health.

"The good news is that children's mental health improves when their parents' work-life balance improves."

Professor Strazdins said families with both parents working was now the norm in Australia and other developed countries.

She said research showed, on average across the Australian population, fathers spend more time at paid work than mothers, who take on more care and domestic responsibilities.

"Mothers are more likely to tailor their work around children's needs, doing flexible or part-time work, and taking time off work to look after a sick child," she said.

Co-researcher Dr Amanda Cooklin from La Trobe University said employers needed to ensure that workplaces were family-friendly, for fathers as well as mothers, so that children can flourish.

"Jobs with manageable hours, autonomy, flexibility and security will not only support the [health](#) and wellbeing of workers, but will also protect the [mental health](#) of children," she said.

"Flexible [work](#) arrangements are usually targeted at mothers, but fathers also benefit from these kinds of arrangements - as do their children."

The study is published in the international journal *Social Science & Medicine*.

More information: Huong Dinh et al. Parents' transitions into and out of work-family conflict and children's mental health: Longitudinal influence via family functioning, *Social Science & Medicine* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2017.10.017](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2017.10.017)

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