

WORK & FAMILY

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MARKETPLACE

It's the Type of Job You Have That Affects The Kids, Studies Say

THE HOUR IS LATE when a friend, sipping coffee after dinner, begins talking about her kids.

Over her employer's pleas that she stay, she recently quit a rigid, frustrating executive job at a firm to start her own business as a real-estate manager in New Jersey. Some big clients have followed her unsolicited; she is working hard, feels in control of her life again and is happier than at any time in memory.

What she didn't foresee, she says, are the changes she is noticing in her daughter, age five. The child used to be miserable during her first hour at school, her teacher has told my friend, withdrawing to the fringes of the group for hours. Now, her daughter comes to school skipping and singing and jumps into class activities right away.

The only apparent cause, my friend says, is that she, the child's mother, feels better about her work and her life. In the past, with job frustrations consuming her, she says, "my life was a frenzy. I was so intense that I didn't have time to hear and observe my kids."

Parents seldom think of children as having a stake in their work beyond the paychecks brought home. But new research suggests children are deeply affected by the quality of parents' work lives.

A study by three researchers, first disclosed last month in a work-family meeting with Vice President Gore, found fewer behavioral problems in children whose mothers have control over how, where and when their work gets done. The same effects appear in children of fathers who say they are satisfied with their work.

"Kids are the unseen stakeholders in the American workplace," says Stewart Friedman, director of the Wharton Life Interests Project at the University of Pennsylvania and one of the researchers. He and co-researchers Jeffrey Greenhaus, professor of commerce and engineering, and Saroj Parasuraman, a management professor, both at Drexel University, plan a book on the sweeping interrelationships between work and family.

IN THE PAST, most studies about kids and the workplace focused on whether a mother's working outside the home hurts children, a question that is far too simplistic. Jobs differ; some drive you nuts, make you impossible to live with and pay so little that you can only afford lousy child care. Others lift your self-esteem, impart new skills and enable you to buy enriching care for your kids.

Assuming all jobs have the same impact is like assuming that driving a car affects everyone the same. If you have a safe car and drive it well, you and your family will benefit. If your car is a wreck and you drive it badly, you'll probably injure both yourself and your passengers.

Not surprisingly, the past studies found no consistent link between kids' development and the simple fact of mothers' employment. But

new research is looking in a more realistic way at how parents' work affects kids. The findings: Whether they like it or not, employers have a big role in raising kids.

In their study of more than 800 managers and professionals, Drs. Friedman, Greenhaus and Parasuraman found that the greater a mother's degree of authority, freedom and control over decision making on the job, the fewer behavior problems in their four- to 17-year-old kids. A 28-item index was used to



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measure such child behaviors as shyness, withdrawal and aggressiveness.

The researchers also found that the amount of time parents spend working isn't linked to their children's behavior. What does have an impact is how much parents' work tensions taint home life. Parents whose jobs don't distract them from family when they are home, or interfere with their psychological involvement with their children, have better-behaved kids.

SEPARATELY, Toby Parcel and Elizabeth Menaghan of Ohio State University have found in several studies that children of mothers with more complex, responsible jobs have better home environments and, in turn, behave better and perform better over time on verbal, math and reading tests, after controlling for mothers' own education and mental skills. And Ellen Greenberger at University of California, Irvine, and others have found that parents with more stimulating, challenging jobs are warmer, less harsh and more responsive in their parenting.

Parents know all this from experience. On a previous job in a banking concern where everyone put in lots of face time, Susan Cannon grew so frustrated with office politics that she had to struggle when she got home to be emotionally available to her toddler. Now, as co-founder of Global Marketing Partners in Glendale, Calif., she is free to call her own shots. Though she is still working long hours, "I'm so happy and fulfilled, I feel as if I'm parenting better than I ever have," she says.

Anne Lawler, a Seattle attorney, says the rigid culture at previous employers sometimes made it hard to respond to her kids' needs. Now, at a law firm she helped found, she has control over her time. She is able to drive one of her children to midday tutoring sessions, improving both his grades and her communication with him. During their drives, he opens up and shares concerns that he otherwise might not.

With such effects now documented in research, employers trying to create high-quality workplaces can take pride in a spinoff benefit: They're helping future generations of workers, too. It all gives new depth to that old term, "family-friendly."