Effects of Low-Wage Employment on Family Well-Being

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Abstract

Assumptions about the processes that link a mother’s employment to the development of her child must underlie expectations about how children may fare when their mothers move from welfare dependence into employment. This article explores the idea, mentioned in the research overview by Zaslow and Emig in this journal issue, that the working conditions such as wages, work hours, and task complexity that mothers experience on the job can influence their behavior as parents and shape the home environments they provide for their children. This article discusses the significance of home environments for children’s intellectual and emotional development and considers how home surroundings change when mothers begin jobs that are more rewarding or less rewarding. The authors conclude that, while maternal employment is not necessarily harmful, if welfare recipients find only low-wage, stressful jobs, working may prove costly for both family and child well-being. The authors recommend that welfare-to-work programs devote attention to (1) assisting mothers to obtain more complex work at good wages, (2) helping mothers understand the role home environments play in shaping children’s development, and (3) encouraging parents to make their children’s home surroundings as positive as possible.

As our society continues to struggle with questions about how to lower welfare expenditures and attempts to define the levels of support that are appropriate to families in need, a small number of researchers have asked how the parental transition from welfare to work might affect children. To assist in policy formulation, this article discusses ways that specific aspects of maternal employment shape children’s home environments, which, in turn, influence child outcomes.

Maternal employment can affect the family in conflicting ways. Obviously, employment contributes to a family’s financial well-being, especially when the mother’s wages make the difference between dependence on welfare and self-sufficiency. On the other hand, poorly paid, stressful jobs with long hours can jeopardize the quality of parenting by their demands on parents’ time, energy, and attention. In many ways, the positive and negative working conditions that
mothers experience on the job are reflected in the home environments they create for their children.

This article uses existing data to illuminate family processes that may confront those who exit welfare and enter employment. The article examines how the home environments of children ages three to six change when mothers begin paid employment and reveals different effects depending on the nature of the mother’s job. Findings reported here indicate that when mothers start a low-wage, repetitive job, the quality of their children’s experiences at home begins to deteriorate, becoming less stimulating and nurturing. Conversely, mothers who start well-paid, interesting jobs provide richer and more supportive home surroundings for their children.

The article also considers disadvantages faced by welfare recipients that may make their entry into employment problematic for their children. To counteract any resulting threats to children’s well-being, programs that aim to support families making the transition from welfare to work should include efforts to enhance the home environments that mothers provide for their children.

**Children’s Home Environments**

Children develop within families, especially in their early years, and therefore family organization and well-being are likely to affect child outcomes. Research has shown that children’s immediate family environments are potent sources of both intellectual and emotional learning. To capture these important influences on children’s development, researchers have used an interview and observational rating scale called the Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment (HOME) to measure the home’s physical safety and cleanliness, the amount of appropriate cognitive stimulation provided there, and the extent of interpersonal warmth shown by the parents to the child. For preschool children, the scale includes such commonsense items for cognitive stimulation as the number of books the child owns, the frequency of story reading, and whether a family member helps the child with numbers, colors, and similar activities. The degree of warmth of the adult-child relationship is captured by the interviewer’s observations of whether the mother conversed pleasantly with the child, hugged him or her, and responded to the child’s questions or requests.

These aspects of the home environment have been shown to have important consequences for children’s cognitive performance and academic achievement and for their emotional well-being and social adjustment. Of course, other family characteristics also affect children’s development. These include the presence of the father, the number of siblings, the child’s physical health, and the mother’s self-esteem, age, and education. For instance, as the number of children in the family increases, so do the behavioral problems and intellectual difficulties of the children. Nevertheless, the quality of parent-child relations and the quality of the home environment that parents provide are important means by which parents’ social experiences and position affect their children’s prospects in life.
Parental Employment

Inquiries concerning the effects parental employment may have on child well-being have typically focused on whether mothers are employed or not, but it may be more fruitful to consider how variations in working conditions affect those who are employed. Three elements of working conditions that affect family life can be differentiated: wage levels, work hours, and occupational complexity. Wage levels are important because they indicate the material support parents can bring to the household. Low wages limit the material resources parents can provide for their children, and low wages can produce feelings of distress that affect parent-child interaction. The effect of number of work hours is, similarly, what one would expect, since time spent at work limits the amount of time parents are able to spend with their children. The combined effects of these factors make the situation of a single parent working long hours for low pay particularly problematic.

Theorists have argued that the working conditions parents face in their paid jobs, including occupational complexity, are important determinants of their child-rearing values. Occupational complexity refers to the extent to which a job entails self-direction, not direct supervision, and variety as opposed to repetition. For instance, white-collar work often involves manipulation of ideas or symbols, or interpersonal dealings. This type of work is likely to be complex and to give the worker autonomy. Blue-collar work more often requires manipulation of things and is more standardized and closely supervised. Complex jobs can lead parents to encourage self-direction and intellectual flexibility in their children, and these qualities benefit children as they mature. By contrast, working in routinized, repetitive, heavily supervised jobs can erode parents’ intellectual flexibility and lead them to stress obedience over autonomy in their children. Researchers who have tested these ideas have found that mothers with more complex jobs provide better home environments for their children.

Starting Work: Effects on the Home

From a policy perspective, one key issue is how children’s home environments will be affected as mothers move from welfare to work. Although no studies have followed families through that specific transition, the authors have examined changes in parental employment and in children’s home environments among a sample of 1,403 families included in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, a longitudinal, intergenerational data set that includes information on maternal background, welfare receipt and work activities, and developmental assessments of children. The study combined information on both working and nonworking mothers with children from three to six years of age in 1986 and again in 1988. In 1986, some 55% of the mothers were employed, and 66% were married to employed men. Over the two-year period studied, an additional 17% of the mothers began employment, and 12% stopped employment. Other important family changes occurred, as well. Another child was born to 24% of the families, 6% married, and 9% divorced. The study examined changes in the quality of preschool children’s home environments, linking these especially to the changes in mothers’ employment status. The results of the study are summarized in Figure 1.

The first group shown in Figure 1, children with mothers who had stable jobs and stable marriages across the two-year interval, experienced the greatest improvement in home environments. By contrast, home environments worsened sharply for the second group shown—children whose mothers were persistently unmarried and unemployed.

The third group shows mothers who remained unmarried but began employment, and for this group the effect of beginning employment varied depending on both wages and the occupational complexity of the mother’s new job. Beginning a high-wage job that was high in complexity did no harm to the quality of children’s home surroundings (the apparent improvement is not significant, statistically), but starting a low-wage job of low complexity was quite problematic. The quality of the home environments dropped for the latter group by a significant amount, worsening at least as much as the homes of mothers who remained unmarried and not employed.

Unmarried mothers who are not employed during their children’s early years (like most current welfare recipients) appear to face a
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Dilemma: If they remain out of the labor force, the persistence of low interpersonal and economic resources in the family takes a toll that damages the quality of children’s home environments during the critical early school years. On the other hand, if they enter the labor force but can find only low-wage employment, these mothers may gain little materially and yet have less time to cope with their unchanged household responsibilities. Some argue that any form of maternal employment is better than none—that is, that “workfare” is preferable to welfare. Requiring mothers to work may indeed be better for state and federal budgets burdened by the cost of welfare benefits, but these findings suggest that children will not necessarily benefit.

Generalizing to Mothers Targeted by Welfare Reform

When applying these findings to policy decisions, it is also important to consider the ways in which the mothers who were not employed in 1986 differed from those who worked that year. Table 1 separates into three groups 1,040 of the women who took part in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and had at least one child between the ages of three and six in 1986. The three groups are (1) mothers who worked and did not receive public assistance (Aid to Families with Dependent Children, food stamps, or a housing subsidy); (2) mothers who worked and also received assistance; and (3) mothers who did not work but relied on public assistance. The table excludes mothers who neither worked outside the home nor received public assistance—homemakers—although they were included in Figure 1. The sizable second group is a reminder that work and welfare receipt can overlap, as families move back and forth between welfare and work or qualify for some welfare benefits even while working. (See also the article by Hershey and Pavetti in this journal issue.)
The family background and employment characteristics shown for the three groups in Table 1 reveal that families in which mothers did not work and did receive public assistance had the fewest resources to draw upon in terms of marital status, levels of maternal education, and levels of cognitive skill. The two employed groups differed, as well. Compared with the mothers who combined employment with public assistance, the self-sufficient workers were more likely to work full time, their wages were higher, and their jobs were more complex. HOME scores vary significantly across the three groups.

These differences mean that the employed mothers depicted in Figure 1 are not strictly comparable to mothers who receive public assistance and might be affected by welfare reform. Most welfare recipients will seek employment with few personal resources, and they will most likely be consigned to the poorly paid, repetitive jobs that Figure 1 shows are the least supportive of positive parenting. (See also the article by Burtless in this journal issue.) It appears that early social advantage in one generation affects the well-being of the next, in part, by influencing the occupational conditions parents face and therefore shaping the family lives parents construct for their children.

### Conclusions

The research discussed here shows the importance of the home environments parents create for their children and reveals that those environments reflect the positive or negative influence of parents’ work outside the home. From the research flow several important policy considerations related to the transition from welfare to work.

The welfare policy debate has concerned the extent of support that society should provide to households headed by single females. Welfare legislation enacted in 1996 replaces a system that penalized paid employment by reducing assistance with one...
that will require mothers who are eligible for welfare to go to work or prepare for employment if they are to receive assistance. The research reported here suggests that it will be important to consider the nature of the jobs that mothers leaving welfare will hold and to ask whether these jobs will be an asset or a hindrance to families and to the development of children. Following the finding that higher levels of maternal job complexity promote better home environments, job training programs that enable mothers to hold better jobs with more complex work would be helpful to their children. Of course, such jobs must first be available.

Child well-being can also be promoted if efforts to strengthen children’s home environments are built into welfare-to-work programs for mothers, which often involve job training, child care assistance, and other related support.15,16 Such programs might take a two-generation focus (as discussed in the article by Blank and Blum in this journal issue) and teach mothers to appreciate the importance of children’s home environments and to strengthen the surroundings they provide. Many improvements can be made that do not require significant material resources, for instance, if adults spend time reading to the child or helping with letters and numbers, if they respond warmly to the child’s questions and requests, and if they keep the home clean and hazard-free.

The home environment signals to the child what the parents stand for, at least in terms of the cognitive, emotional, and physical dimensions considered in this study. It is appropriate to place responsibility on the parents for providing a positive home environment for their children, although larger societal forces surely shape the conditions under which parents create home environments. Both the public and the parents may respond favorably to social interventions like those suggested here that focus attention on children’s needs, while encouraging their parents to become self-supporting.