

# Parents' Employment and Children's Wellbeing

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*Carolyn J. Heinrich*

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## **Summary**

Since modern welfare reform began in the 1980s, we have seen low-income parents leave the welfare rolls and join the workforce in large numbers. At the same time, the Earned Income Tax Credit has offered a monetary incentive for low-income parents to work. Thus, unlike some of the other two-generation mechanisms discussed in this issue of *Future of Children*, policies that encourage low-income parents to work are both widespread and well-entrenched in the United States.

But parents' (and especially mothers') work, writes Carolyn Heinrich, is not unambiguously beneficial for their children. On the one hand, working parents can be positive role models for their children, and, of course, the income they earn can improve their children's lives in many ways. On the other hand, work can impair the developing bond between parents and young children, especially when the parents work long hours or evening and night shifts. The stress that parents bring home from their jobs can detract from their parenting skills, undermine the atmosphere in the home, and thereby introduce stress into children's lives.

Unfortunately, it is low-income parents who are most likely to work in stressful, low-quality jobs that feature low pay, little autonomy, inflexible hours, and few or no benefits. And low-income children whose parents are working are more likely to be placed in inadequate child care or to go unsupervised. Two-generation approaches, Heinrich writes, could maximize the benefits and minimize the detriments of parents' work by expanding workplace flexibility, and especially by mandating enough paid leave so that mothers can breastfeed and form close bonds with their infants; by helping parents place their children in high-quality child care; and by helping low-income parents train for, find, and keep a well-paying job with benefits.

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**D**ecades ago, highly regarded economists such as John Maynard Keynes predicted that technological advances would reduce the number of hours Americans worked by one-half to two-thirds.<sup>1</sup> It was also anticipated that we would enjoy three times the number of vacation days, allowing more time for leisure and to spend with our families. Alas, not only is the 40-hour workweek still standard, but parents are working more hours than ever. In 2011, among 34.3 million U.S. families with children, 87.2 percent had an employed parent, and in 58.5 percent of these families, both parents worked.<sup>2</sup> Some economists and historians argue that Americans are working more because they have chosen to consume more, but others suggest that we have to work more to support our families. In fact, women, whose participation in the workforce has been steadily rising, are now the main breadwinners in 40 percent of families, up from 11 percent in 1960.<sup>3</sup>

Social and policy changes that affect how much parents work have long been under way. In the 1960s, two-thirds of children had a parent who stayed at home; 40 years later, this was true for only one-third of children.<sup>4</sup> Public approval of mothers' working has grown steadily. A majority of U.S. adults (57 percent) now agree that both husbands and wives should contribute to family income, and 75 percent disagree with the idea that women should return to "traditional roles."<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, public policies have increased both expectations that parents will work and incentives for them to do so, particularly among low-income and single-parent families. Before 1979, women who received welfare were not expected to work if they had children under 16. Work requirements were then

tightened, and by 1988, women with children older than two were expected to work if they received public assistance. Finally, Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), which aimed to end dependence on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage. Under PRWORA, states may exempt parents with children under age one from work requirements but are not obligated to exempt any parent who receives cash assistance.

The tightening of work mandates under welfare reform, along with greater incentives to work from successive expansions of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), roused a public debate about whether parents' employment might enhance or harm their children's wellbeing. People on one side stressed the expected benefits of parents' work, including positive role models for children, higher self-esteem and a sense of control among working mothers, more productive family routines, and higher earnings. Others saw possible negative consequences, such as increased stress on parents, children placed in unsafe or unsuitable child care, and less monitoring of older children.<sup>6</sup> Many researchers have sought to use variations in the ways policies have been implemented over time and across states to shed light on the relationship between parents' work and children's wellbeing, particularly for lower-income families.

If more parents are working, what are the implications for their children's wellbeing? In this article, I investigate the pathways through which parents' employment affects their children, and I evaluate the evidence on the effects of parents' work. I then consider public policies intended to moderate the detrimental effects of parents' work and enhance the positive ones. Among the important findings:

- Although U.S. policies create strong incentives for parents to work and provide additional income support for low-earning parents that is beneficial to children, they are less effective in ensuring that children whose parents work have access to appropriate and stimulating early care environments.
- A preponderance of evidence shows that most children benefit if their mothers are their primary caregivers during their first year of life, and recent studies suggest that paid or partially paid leave of six weeks to six months would encourage more mothers to delay their return to work and breast-feed their children longer.
- Research finds that low-quality jobs (for example, those with low pay, irregular hours, or few or no benefits) are linked with higher work-related stress for parents, which in turn detracts from children's wellbeing. The effects of parents' work-related stress on children are particularly strong for single-mother families.

Presently, the parents whose work is most likely to have negative effects on their children are the same parents who are least able to take leave, cut their paid work hours, or otherwise secure the resources they need to provide for their children's wellbeing. As a nation, we could do more (possibly by simplifying federal tax provisions) to encourage employers to offer benefits such as paid sick leave, which enhance job quality and help parents balance work with the needs of their children.

### **How Parents' Employment Affects Children's Wellbeing**

The broad societal support for women in the workforce does not necessarily hold true for mothers with young children. Only 12 percent

of people surveyed in 2009 agreed that mothers with young children should work full-time, including only 13 percent of mothers with young children who were working full-time themselves. In fact, the first year of a child's life is when mothers are least likely to work full-time or to work at all.<sup>7</sup> The fact that people are more concerned about how mothers' work affects young children mirrors the findings of research in developmental psychology and neurobiology, which suggest that some periods of early childhood are particularly critical or sensitive for a child's brain development and long-term physical and mental health.<sup>8</sup>

### **How Parents' Work Can Decrease Children's Wellbeing**

For some time, neurological research has told us that an infant's brain "blossoms" with new connections (that is, synapses) following birth, and that the rate at which these connections develop and are later pruned can be strongly influenced by the infant's early environment.<sup>9</sup> Research on the healthy development of children consistently shows that children need stable family relationships, with adults who are responsive, nurturing, and protective; physically safe environments that allow them to explore without risk or fear of harm; and adequate nutrition and health care.<sup>10</sup>

Focusing on mothers, one way that a mother's work might directly influence her child's development is through its effect on her ability to form a bond with her infant that promotes the child's security and attachment, as well as her ability to care for the child responsively and appropriately.<sup>11</sup> For example, if a mother's work requires frequent or long separations from her child, their bonding could be impeded—although many other factors could affect the outcome, such as the quality of the

caregiver who substitutes for the mother or the mother's job-related stress. There are also varying perspectives regarding when maternal employment is more likely to affect the bonding process between mother and child. Some research suggests that a mother's return to work after their attachment is secure (rather than earlier in the bonding process) could be more disruptive to the child.<sup>12</sup>

When a mother returns to work may also affect how long she breastfeeds her infant or whether she starts breastfeeding at all. Research overwhelmingly documents that children benefit from breastfeeding exclusively in the first six months after birth and continuing some breastfeeding through their first year.<sup>13</sup> The benefits include better respiratory health; fewer ear and throat infections; lower incidence of allergies, diabetes, and other diseases; lower rates of childhood and adult obesity; and enhanced neurological development. One economic argument suggests that if a mother expects to go back to work relatively soon after a child's birth, the costs of learning and equipping for breastfeeding might exceed the perceived benefits and discourage the mother from starting. Upon returning to work, breastfeeding mothers need time, equipment, and accommodations for expressing milk; these may not be available, depending on the nature of their work and their employer. Mothers who reduce their work hours, request extended leaves, change employers, or quit working so that they can continue breastfeeding may lose current and future earnings. These factors likely contribute to the fact that low-income mothers have significantly lower rates of breastfeeding than do wealthier mothers.

Scientists widely agree that a child's first months are among the most sensitive for healthy development. But the trajectory of a

child's development in the first three years of life is not fixed.<sup>14</sup> Jack Shonkoff, director of the Harvard Center on the Developing Child, and colleagues describe the process of development "as a function of 'nature dancing with nurture over time.'"<sup>15</sup> In other words, from conception onward, biology interacts with physical and social environments to shape a child's pathways and achievements. In this sense, the time that parents—both mothers and fathers—spend caring for children is likely to influence a child's development well beyond the initial bonding period, and in different ways depending on the children's age and circumstances. Parents' work can affect all of this.

For example, researchers have documented that children are more likely to spend time without parental supervision at younger ages if their parents are working, which may in turn harm the children's performance in school and increase their participation in risky behaviors.<sup>16</sup> Theories of how parents function and nurture their children suggest that ongoing stress at work may cause parents to withdraw from interacting with their children at home, or to be more vulnerable to stimuli that trigger conflict with their children. Researchers describe this as "role overload": working parents may be overwhelmed by the feeling that they can't accomplish everything they need to do, and, in this way, work stress becomes linked to stressful situations in the home.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, one parent's work stress might bubble over to the other, reducing the buffering influence that the other parent might have in the family.

More generally, family systems theory sees families as a "subsystem" (with marital, parental, and sibling ties) that is rooted in larger systems—for example, the community. Conditions or changes in these larger

systems that affect one family member may also affect his or her relationships with other family members and, in turn, the way those family members function.<sup>18</sup> Research shows that parents feel pressured by external demands to work for pay, such as financial uncertainty, welfare requirements, or the rising cost of goods that are thought to benefit children (for example, child care, tutoring etc.).<sup>19</sup> These demands, in turn, may affect parents' job satisfaction, physical and mental health, coping resources and ability to provide socio-emotional support for their children. Long work hours, lack of autonomy, job insecurity, and a heavy workload are also associated with adult mental health problems (for example, anxiety and depression), and parents' mental health is believed to play a fundamental role in their children's mental and physical development.<sup>20</sup>

### **How Parents' Work Can Enhance Children's Wellbeing**

At the same time, working parents earn money that they can use to improve how they care for their children and the quality of their children's environments. For example, they might spend money on nutrition, child care, health care, the safety of their physical surroundings, or opportunities for learning. Economists describe these expenditures as "inputs" for producing "child quality." Nobel Prize-winning economist Gary Becker's theory of "household production" laid the foundation for a large body of research that examines how parents allocate their time between work and children (or other activities, such as leisure), and how household budgets (which, of course, are affected by parents' employment) constrain or support the investments they want to make in their children. In this model, parents have to make trade-offs as they decide how much time

to spend at work versus at home with their children, and these decisions in turn depend on how much they earn (and the prices they have to pay for goods), their preferences for investing in their children's wellbeing (versus their own), and the "productivity" of their time with children versus the time they spend in other activities.<sup>21</sup>

Researchers who apply this economic model suggest, for example, that the amount of time parents spend with their children at home depends in part on how productive or efficient they are both at home and in the workplace. Parents for whom staying at home has higher opportunity costs (that is, those who are more productive in the workplace than at home) would be more likely to substitute hired child care for their own care of their children.<sup>22</sup> Family choices also depend on the overall family budget and wealth, and families with greater resources are expected to invest more in their children and potentially increase their children's chances of success. (However, parents have different preferences for investing resources in their children, so an increase in earnings or other sources of household income may not necessarily translate into a comparable rise in spending on the children.) With these ideas in mind, researchers have examined whether public policies that expand financial incentives to work or require parents to work (as in the case of the mid-1990s welfare reforms) have increased family income and, in turn, had positive effects on children.

In addition to how much time parents spend with their children (rather than at work) and when in their children's lives they trade off time at home with employment, what parents do in the time they spend with their children—or how they interact, and the quality of those interactions—is also very important

to their children's wellbeing. Psychological and sociological theories suggest that the types of interactions parents have with their children can be influenced by a number of factors, both at work and elsewhere. For example, are there two parents in the household, and are both working? How involved is the mother vis-à-vis the father (or other caregiver) in hands-on care of the children? How do the quality of the parents' jobs, the stress they experience at work, their relationship as a couple and as a family, the children's gender, and other factors affect the parents' interactions with and availability to the children? In general, how central is child rearing in the lives of the parents and the family?<sup>23</sup>

For older children in particular, these theories also suggest that parents play an important part as role models through work and caregiving. Children and adolescents may change their own behavior and goals in response to the behavior modeled by their parents; for example, they might devote more time to their studies to increase their own future job prospects. In lower-income families where work replaces welfare, reliance on welfare may appear less attractive (or self-sufficiency more rewarding), and teenage childbearing and other risky activities may be reduced.<sup>24</sup> Once again, many factors may help determine how parents as role models influence their children's wellbeing.

### **How Parents' Job Loss Affects Children's Wellbeing**

With lingering high unemployment and longer-term unemployment among working-age adults in the wake of the Great Recession, we need to know more about how parents' job loss affects children's wellbeing. In the context of family systems theory, parents' job

loss presents a significant shock to the family subsystem. First, it reduces family income, sometimes substantially and permanently, constraining parents' ability to invest in their children.<sup>25</sup> The stress associated with job loss can also undermine parents' physical and mental health, which, in turn, can undermine children's health and family relationships. Job loss may also affect family structure—for example, parents may divorce<sup>26</sup>—compounding the blow to the family subsystem. At the same time, the strength and quality of marital and parent-child relationships, as well as the extent to which other social contacts and supports continue (that is, are not disrupted by the changes that follow job loss) may limit the negative effects that might otherwise spill over to the children.

In this section, I have described a number of ways that parents' employment may affect children's wellbeing, whether positively or negatively. An immense amount of research has examined these pathways and their implications for children's wellbeing. Next, I focus on the strongest evidence generated by these studies.

### **Evidence on How Parents' Work Affects Children's Wellbeing**

It is especially challenging to causally link parents' employment to children's wellbeing, in part because of the many intricate and intimate family factors that come into play. Parents can't be randomly assigned to jobs, nor can children be randomly assigned to parents who work or don't work, so no controlled experiment can disentangle the influence of these factors. Some studies have relied on longitudinal data, such as the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY) and the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), that allow researchers to measure children's

wellbeing over time and make adjustments for potential mediating variables. Even then, it is very difficult to determine the effects of parent's work on children's wellbeing with a fair level of confidence that the estimated effects are not biased by factors we are not observing or measuring.<sup>27</sup> In this review of the research, I take these limitations into account and indicate where there is consensus or greater confidence in the results, as well as where findings are still tentative or discrepant.

### **Effects of Mothers' Work on Children's Wellbeing**

As we've seen, biological and developmental studies suggest that, in the first years of a child's life, we should be more concerned about mothers' work than fathers' work. This research has produced clear evidence that maternal stress affects infants' physiologic responses to stress, and that excessive or prolonged exposure to stress can harm a young child's socio-emotional and cognitive development. Work can be one source of sustained stress for mothers; through separation from their mothers during working hours, it can be a source of chronic stress for infants as well. However, if an available and caring adult helps children cope with stress (that is, protects children from its harmful effects), they can develop positive responses to stress that may help them deal with frustration and other adverse experiences later in life.<sup>28</sup>

An extensive review and summary of five decades of research on how maternal employment affects children's cognitive and behavioral development confirms the need to account for contextual factors—for example, the timing and nature of a mother's work, or the quality of care provided by others besides the mother—to discern plausible effects of mothers' work on their children.<sup>29</sup> Specifically,

there is a relatively strong consensus that higher-quality early child care (whether by parents or others) enhances children's cognitive and social development, as well as their later academic achievement and behavior.<sup>30</sup> That said, the strength and also the direction of these associations are moderated by other variables, including family structure, income, mother's education, and the child's age.

One fairly cohesive story that emerges from this interdisciplinary research is that, in single-parent or low-income families, the positive effects of additional income (and reduced financial stress) that are associated with maternal work are likely to outweigh the potential negative effects of less time caring for children, as long as the substitute care is not of poor quality—especially for children under five, who spend more time in child care. One study, using NLSY data, examined mothers who worked during their children's first three years. The researchers found that in low-income families, the children of these mothers had significantly fewer behavioral problems at ages 7–9 than did the children of other mothers, and that in single-parent families, such children had significantly higher reading scores at ages 3–4 and again at ages 7–12.<sup>31</sup> However, another study, which also used NLSY data, looked at single mothers who were affected by PRWORA's work mandates (which significantly increased their work hours and their use of child care) and found that mothers' work had a significant adverse effect on children's test scores at ages 3–6, reducing them by 2.6 percent on average.<sup>32</sup> This adverse effect appeared to be driven by the fact that three-fourths of the mothers were using informal child-care arrangements (that is, non-center-based care). Children who were placed in formal, center-based care showed no reduction in test scores. Other researchers, studying mothers

who were leaving welfare, have not found a relationship between mothers going to work and preschool children's cognitive achievement or behavior. However, they did find that when mothers left welfare for work, adolescent children's reading skills and mental health improved, and their participation in risky behaviors (for example, using drugs and alcohol) decreased.<sup>33</sup>

Research suggests that the payoff for direct time investment in children (versus higher income from working) may be greater among more highly educated women, and not only for children in their early years. One study used PSID data to examine the relationship among the time mothers spent caring for their 7- to 13-year-old children, the time they spent working, and the children's educational attainment at ages 20–26. The researchers found that greater maternal child-care time produced benefits only for children whose mothers had 12 or more years of schooling.<sup>34</sup> Another study took advantage of a Swedish policy reform in 1988 that increased paid parental leave from 12 to 15 months to look at the relationship between the time mothers spent caring for their children and the children's educational achievements.<sup>35</sup> Assessing the impact of maternal care relative to the common alternative of subsidized child care, the researchers found a positive association between increased parental leave and children's scholastic performance at age 16 only for children whose mothers had a postsecondary education; subsidized child care did not have the same effect. The analysis showed that other possible moderating factors, such as mother's mental health or the children's health, did not play a role in the outcome.

Evidence on how maternal employment affects infants and very young children is likewise mixed, although a preponderance

of findings suggests that children's cognitive development is enhanced if mothers are their primary caregivers in their first year and work less than full-time through age three.<sup>36</sup> One seminal study used data from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development's Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development to see how the timing and intensity of mothers' employment affects children's cognitive development at age three years.<sup>37</sup> Children whose mothers worked at any time before they were nine months old scored lower on a school readiness measure, and the negative effect was largest for children whose mothers worked 30 or more hours per week. Consistent with the research discussed above, the study reported larger negative effects for married couples than for families headed by single parents, suggesting again that additional income from employment may have more beneficial effects for children in single-parent households. Another study similarly found that when mothers went to work in the first year of their children's lives, or worked longer hours in their second or third years, the children's reading and math scores suffered.<sup>38</sup>

Mothers who go to work sooner after a child's birth and work longer hours are less likely to breastfeed, which is particularly concerning given the substantial health benefits for children breastfed in the first six months to one year of their lives. Starting at about six weeks after the birth of a child, returning to work emerges as the top reason that mothers give for discontinuing breastfeeding.<sup>39</sup> Mothers say that the substantial time and commitment required to express their milk, and the lack of accommodations in many workplaces for pumping breast milk or breastfeeding, deter them from breastfeeding as long as they would like. Furthermore, recent research confirms that, compared with

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mothers who feed their children formula or breastfeed for less than six months, mothers who breastfeed for six months or longer experience a larger decline in their earnings in the year after giving birth and slower growth in earnings in the five years after childbirth.<sup>40</sup> This larger, longer-term reduction in earnings is explained by the fact that mothers who breastfeed for six months or longer tend to take more time off from work. But the research does not identify whether they take more time off because of their own changing views about work versus time with family or whether they feel pushed out because it's so hard to combine work with breastfeeding and infant care. Regardless, the economic penalty these mothers pay is cause for concern, considering that both the rate and duration of breastfeeding are significantly lower among poorer, less-educated working women than among wealthier, better-educated mothers (whether employed or unemployed).

### **Effects of Parents' Job Loss**

Most researchers who study how parents' work affects children have focused primarily on how mothers allocate their time between work and child care, although they also emphasize that other family members, particularly fathers, play an important role in providing financial support, ensuring quality

substitute care, and buffering children from work-related stress. Studies of fathers suggest that, as with mothers, both the level of their involvement and their warmth and responsiveness determine the extent of their influence on children's behavior and academic achievement.<sup>41</sup>

Empirical evidence also shows that children are more likely to be affected by a father's job loss than by a mother's.<sup>42</sup> A parent's job loss can bring considerable financial and mental distress that reverberates through the family system. For example, in one study, Slovakian adolescents perceived lower support from fathers who experienced unemployment, likely because of the stress associated with the father's job loss.<sup>43</sup> But the amount of support they perceived from their mothers was not affected by either the father's or mother's job loss, and high support from the mother was particularly protective for the health of adolescents whose father lost his job. Similarly, other research has found that women experience less stress and fewer mental health problems in the face of their own unemployment than do men.<sup>44</sup>

To study the relationship between parents' job loss and children's development, researchers must disentangle the influence of parent characteristics, as well as parent-child interactions, that affect children's wellbeing even in the absence of job loss (for example, parents' mental health, marital or family relationship quality, etc.). When a company closes or downsizes, researchers can empirically examine the effects of job losses that are not associated with parents' individual characteristics. For example, one study from Norway examined the effects of this kind of abrupt parental job loss, occurring when children were in tenth grade, on the children's grade point averages

(GPAs) in their high school graduation year. Children whose fathers lost their jobs had a significantly lower graduation-year GPA, but a mother's job loss had no significant effects. Among children whose fathers had lower earnings before losing their jobs, and those who lived in communities with weaker job markets, the effect of fathers' job loss on GPA was nearly twice as large. Seeking the precise cause of the negative effect on GPA, the researchers were able to rule out explanations tied to loss of family income, changes in maternal employment or time inputs, and marital dissolution and relocation. Mental distress associated with job loss appeared to be the driving factor.

The Norwegian findings echo those of a U.S.-based study that used data on job loss and children's educational achievement from the 1996, 2001, and 2004 panels of the Survey of Income and Program Participation.<sup>45</sup> Focusing on short-term measures of children's educational progress, the researchers found that parents' job loss increased the likelihood that children would be retained in school by approximately 15 percent. Furthermore, this negative effect was more likely among children with less-educated parents (those with a high school degree or less). And a study of Canadian families, which included some fathers who lost their jobs when their company closed, found that parents' job loss diminished children's long-term labor market prospects. Sons who were 11 to 14 years old when their fathers lost a job saw their earnings as adults reduced by about 9 percent, on average; daughters also saw lower earnings later in life, though the reduction was imprecisely estimated. Like the Norwegian study, this study showed no link between this negative effect and divorce, residential relocation, or changes in mothers' earnings and employment; like the U.S.

study, it found that negative effects on children were more prevalent among families who had the lowest incomes before the parents' job loss. The study's authors could not say what best accounted for the detrimental long-term effect on children's economic prospects: the stress associated with parents' job loss, or the loss of family income itself.

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*Children in poorer or single-parent families face a greater likelihood that their parents' work will have harmful effects on their wellbeing.*

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### Parents' Job Characteristics and Children's Wellbeing

Losing a job is a life-altering event for families, but research also suggests that other aspects of parents' work, such as job quality, can strongly affect how much time parents spend with children and the nature of their interactions. Theory and empirical research identify four key aspects of job quality as particularly germane to the effects of parents' work on children's wellbeing: the level of job security that parents perceive they have, which relates to feelings of financial stability; how much control parents have over what they do in their work; flexibility in work scheduling (for example, start and end times); and paid family leave (for example, maternity/paternity and other types of personal or family leave). Using an index of job quality based on these four dimensions and data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, one team of researchers analyzed the relationship between job quality and a "child difficulties score," which

measured children's distress, negative or oppositional behaviors, inattention or hyperactivity, and peer problems.<sup>46</sup> They found a strong relationship between job quality and children's difficulties that was mediated by parents' distress (both mothers' and fathers'); that is, when parents were more stressed, their children were more likely to experience difficulties. This relationship was particularly strong in single-mother families.

Among the four aspects of job quality, research shows, parents' work schedules and their degree of flexibility are particularly important for children. Studies of parents' shift work have found that preschool and elementary school children are significantly more likely to have behavioral problems when their parents work at night.<sup>47</sup> The researchers speculated that the mental stress of night work, as well as less effective parenting behaviors linked to such work schedules, might account for these detrimental effects. Several studies that used NLSY data to examine how parents' nonstandard work schedules affect children's wellbeing have found similar results.<sup>48</sup> Taking into account factors such as children's age, gender, and family income, nighttime work by both mothers and fathers has been found to be more harmful to children, and to parents' relationships with their children, than work on other shifts. Among adolescent children, there is a strong association between the number of years that their mothers and fathers work the night shift and risky behaviors. Night shift work reduces the amount of time mothers spend with their children, fathers' knowledge of children's whereabouts, fathers' closeness to their children, and the quality of the home environment. The relative importance of these factors varies with the age of the child, and the size of the effects also varies for some subgroups: boys, children in poorer or single-parent families, and whose

parents work in nonprofessional occupations experience the most negative effects.

In an Australian study that focused on children's health, researchers found that children whose parents, and particularly fathers, worked nonstandard schedules were significantly more likely to be obese or overweight, even after adjusting for household income and family and lifestyle factors.<sup>49</sup> The added pressure created by fathers' nonstandard work hours appeared to be borne largely by mothers, who in turn compromised in the family food environment (for example, by buying more fully prepared meals that tended to be higher in fat, sugar, and salt and larger in portion size). Another study, of adolescents, found a positive association between mothers' nonstandard work schedules and children's body mass index (BMI), suggesting that as children get older and have less adult supervision, mothers' work schedules grow increasingly important.<sup>50</sup> Other research suggests that parental supervision, which is affected by parental work hours and schedules, is particularly critical for children's wellbeing in low-income, single-parent families, or in families where parents' night and evening shift work is a condition of employment.<sup>51</sup> Parents who work nonstandard shifts may experience more physical and emotional stress, and parents' stress is in turn known to worsen parent-child interactions and children's behavior.<sup>52</sup>

The empirical evidence I've presented—from a range of studies in the United States and other countries that explore numerous ways parents' work might affect children—consistently suggests that children in poorer or single-parent families face a greater likelihood that their parents' work will have harmful effects on their wellbeing. Qualitative research further illuminates the many ways that the stress associated with

economic struggles, poor job quality, lack of support at home, limited child care choices, and other factors can compound the difficulties that parents and children in these families face. For example, Ask the Children, a study involving more than 1,000 children in grades 3–12, supports the empirical finding that child-care arrangements may be especially critical to the development of children in lower-income families; children in lower-quality child care, which low-income families are more likely to use, are more affected by their mothers' behavior (particularly their warmth and responsiveness).<sup>53</sup> In addition, low-income parents are less likely to hold jobs with attractive attributes such as high job security and stability, autonomy in their work, meaningful work tasks, low frustration, and a supportive work-life culture, and they may be less likely to have positive feelings about their work roles. Ask the Children's data suggest that when parents value their work and think that they are doing the right thing for themselves and their families, whether by working or by staying home, their children are more likely to fare well, because this attitude will be reflected in their care and responsiveness. Furthermore, when parents have positive experiences at work, and in combining work and family responsibilities, the potential benefits for children of parents' serving as role models through their work—such as greater self-sufficiency and independence, social competence, and aspirations for their own schooling and career success—are more likely to be realized.

### **Policies That Address Parents' Work and Children's Wellbeing**

The preceding sections have described ways that parents' work may affect children's wellbeing, as well as the evidence on both positive and negative effects of parents' work.

Few would dispute, for example, that parents' employment generates income that is key to promoting the health and wellbeing of children, the quality of their environments, and their prospects for future productivity and success in nurturing the next generation. At the same time, evidence of potential negative effects on children is also compelling, and the ways that parents' employment might bring about harm are complex and linked to family resources and functioning. Ideally, public policies would bolster the positive effects of parents' work on children's wellbeing and minimize the detrimental effects.

Data from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) are frequently used to compare parental employment and work support policies across nations. OECD data for 18 developed countries show that employment rates among mothers in the United States are very comparable to those elsewhere. For example, in 2002, about 69 percent of U.S. mothers with children aged 6–14 were employed, equaling the OECD-18 average, while about 60 percent of U.S. mothers with children aged 3–5 and 56.6 percent with children under age three were employed, 3.5–4 percentage points below the OECD-18 averages.<sup>54</sup> As of 2009, approximately 70 percent of women aged 25–54 in the United States and in OECD countries were employed, suggesting that women with school-age children are participating in the labor force at about the same rate as working-age women across developed countries. Yet U.S. public policies that are intended to support working parents and their families look very different from those found elsewhere.

## Income Support

The U.S. ranks third among 20 OECD countries in its support of families through cash transfers and tax benefits, which are closely linked to reductions in child poverty (as well as to parents' employment in the United States).<sup>55</sup> These income supports, which increased steadily from 1995 to 2005 through the expansion of the EITC earnings supplements, are particularly important for low-income parents. Parental employment is one of the most important factors in reducing the risk of child poverty, and numerous studies have found that the EITC promotes parental work, especially among single mothers, suggesting that these benefits may play a key role in improving children's wellbeing.<sup>56</sup> There is also growing evidence of strong positive linkages between earnings supplements for working parents and young children's educational performance, as well as their later educational attainment and labor market earnings.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, we know that higher income is associated with better home environments. Still, researchers who explore the role of income in improving children's home environments and, in turn, children's behavior and academic readiness have found weaker evidence for a direct causal association between income and better child outcomes.<sup>58</sup> More generally, scholars who have synthesized the research and policy evidence appear to concur that policies that increase family income are less likely to improve children's wellbeing when support is weak for parental leave to care for children (for example, in the first year after birth or during illness) or for quality substitute care.<sup>59</sup>

## Parental Leave

Worldwide, one of the most common policies to support working parents and their families is paid parental leave. In fact, the United

States is among only four of 173 nations that do not guarantee paid parental leave, although the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) gives some parents the right to take 12 weeks of unpaid leave after the birth (or adoption) of a child.<sup>60</sup> In a recent *Future of Children* article, Christopher Ruhm thoroughly reviewed state family leave policies, including those of six states that offer some form of paid leave (either short-term paid leave or temporary disability insurance).<sup>61</sup> His review makes clear the comparative generosity of European policies, which provide paid maternity leave for 14–20 weeks, at 70 to 100 percent of the mother's pre-childbirth wages.

Empirical studies of the relationship among family leave policies and children's material wellbeing, health and educational attainment find that paid parental leave, combined with generous public support for child care and early education, are significantly correlated with improved health and higher educational attainment among children.<sup>62</sup> One analysis, using 1969–94 data from 16 European countries, showed that associations between paid parental leave and children's health and wellbeing were strongest for infants aged 2–12 months, possibly because mothers who take paid leave are more likely to breast-feed.<sup>63</sup> One study examined a Canadian policy change that expanded paid parental leave, from 15 weeks of paid leave for mothers plus 10 weeks of paid leave that could be split between mothers and fathers to a total of 50 weeks of paid leave, of which 35 weeks could be shared between parents.<sup>64</sup> Looking specifically at how the change affected the amount of time mothers spent at home and how long they breastfed, the researchers found that after the change, mothers spent 2.3 more months at home (a 28 percent increase) and breastfed about one month longer. Mothers were also significantly more

likely to say they stopped breastfeeding because they were introducing solid food, rather than because they were going back to work. And a recent analysis of California's paid parental leave policy, using 1999–2010 data from the Current Population Survey, found that even a far less generous policy (six weeks of partially paid leave) substantially increased maternity and family leave-taking (compared with unpaid leave under FMLA), especially among disadvantaged mothers, with no evidence of negative effects on mothers' future labor market earnings.<sup>65</sup>

Finally, a recent study examined a 1977 Norwegian policy reform that increased parental leave from 12 weeks of unpaid leave (the current U.S. policy) to four months of paid leave and 12 months of unpaid leave. Because several decades have passed since the reform took effect, the researchers were able to examine its longer-term effects. They found that children whose mothers spent more time with them during their first year of life, thanks to the expanded parental leave, were more likely to finish high school and had 5 percent higher earnings at age 30. These effects were larger for children whose mothers had less than 10 years of education; these children realized 8 percent higher earnings at age 30.

## Child Care

The authors of the Norwegian study noted that, at the time of the 1977 parental leave reform, very little high-quality child care was available for children under two years (the primary alternative was grandparents or other informal care). Some of the research described earlier suggests that, depending on the quantity and quality, formal child care can have positive effects on children's cognitive development, and that it is potentially

most beneficial for disadvantaged children. Public spending on child care in the United States comes primarily through the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), a federal block grant that aims to help low-income families with work-related child care expenses. Parents can use these subsidies for formal child care, family day care or care provided in their own home or in the home of another family member; other than for the Head Start program, the rate of the subsidy is not tied to measures of program quality.<sup>66</sup> In fiscal year 2010, states spent \$9.5 billion in combined federal and state funds on child care subsidies for low-income families, including CCDF funds as well as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) transfers into CCDF.

The Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit is another form of subsidy that working parents can use for child care. The credit can refund 20 to 35 percent of day-care expenses and has no restrictions on the type of care parents can purchase. However, because this tax credit is nonrefundable (that is, it can't reduce the amount of tax owed to less than zero), low-income families who owe little or no income tax derive little benefit. Similarly, the cost of employer-provided dependent care is excluded from taxable income, another form of public support for child care that is not targeted to low-income families.

Overall, the United States spends less than other developed countries on its public child care programs (both in absolute terms and as a percentage of gross domestic product), and it has the lowest share of children enrolled in formal child care.<sup>67</sup> Research confirms that child care subsidies encourage mothers to work and increase parents' use of child care, although it also suggests that a preponderance of low-quality options, as well as lack of

information about better-quality programs and their costs, may push low-income families toward informal or inferior child care. Still, evidence on the effects of child care subsidies on children's wellbeing is mixed. One recent study suggests that children with better-educated mothers who received subsidized care experienced substantial increases in behavioral problems, whereas children with less-educated mothers (a high school degree or less) were more likely to show improvements in positive social behaviors. The better-educated mothers not only worked more hours, but they were also less likely to enroll their children in center- and family-based care.<sup>68</sup>

### **Worker Supports and Workplace Flexibility**

As we've seen, research has also revealed associations between parental job quality (that is, job security, flexibility, work schedules, etc.) and children's wellbeing, suggesting children's outcomes could be enhanced through policies that improve worker supports, reduce parents' job-related stress and increase parents' ability to respond to their children's needs. Employee benefits and supports such as paid sick leave, flexible work hours, time off for children's health and educational needs, breastfeeding breaks, premium pay for night shift work and paid vacation (in addition to paid parental leave and child care support) are mandatory in most advanced countries. But among these benefits and supports, only breastfeeding breaks are required in the United States (through legislation passed only in 2010). A group of scholars analyzed a global database of legislation that mandates these worker support policies for 175 countries and found no negative associations between more generous national policies and measures of

the nations' economic competitiveness.<sup>69</sup> In fact, their review of the research suggests that these policies have a number of potential benefits for employers, workers, and children, including increased employee retention and productivity, lower turnover and absenteeism, reduced business costs and increased profitability, lower parental stress, increased parental involvement with children, higher rates of child immunization, and improved child health, behavior, and cognitive achievement.

These findings raise the question of why the United States trails its developed-country peers (and some developing countries) in mandating worker benefits. One reason is that U.S. employers have strongly opposed legislation to increase benefits such as paid parental leave, sick leave, and other workplace flexibility provisions, on the grounds that the costs would be too high and would compromise their competitiveness.<sup>70</sup> But the Council of Economic Advisors (CEA) investigated workplace flexibility and found that few employers have accurate information about the costs and benefits of workplace flexibility policies.<sup>71</sup> In addition, because the costs and benefits of expanding workplace flexibility are likely to differ across industries and by employer size, it is difficult to assess how wider adoption of more generous worker supports might benefit or harm not only employers and workers, but also society and the U.S. economy overall. Furthermore, not only do we lack data on the prevalence of existing workplace flexibility practices, but employers and employees differ in their reports of whether such supports are available. The CEA used data from two surveys—one of employers and one of employees—to examine to what extent private sector employers are adapting their policies to changes in workforce participation (and the growing potential for work-family conflicts).

More than half of employers indicated that they gave at least some workers the flexibility to change their work start and end times, but fewer than one-third of full-time workers and only 39 percent of part-time workers reported having this flexibility. Other research shows that just 30 percent of U.S. employees are offered paid sick leave that they can use for themselves or to care for family members.<sup>72</sup>

The CEA's finding that less-skilled workers are less likely than their more highly skilled counterparts to have workplace flexibility is especially worrisome. Parents in low-paid, low-skilled positions are also more likely to work a nonstandard shift as a requirement of their job (rather than for work-family balance).<sup>73</sup> And under FMLA, individual employees are eligible only if they worked at least 1,250 hours in the previous year, and employers with fewer than 50 workers do not have to provide unpaid leave. About half of workers do not qualify for unpaid family leave under FMLA, and these are more likely to be less-skilled, low-income workers.<sup>74</sup> In effect, the parents of families that are most at risk of seeing harmful spillover effects from work and disruptions to family routines are the same parents who are least able to take leave, cut their paid work hours, or reschedule them on occasion to accommodate their children's needs.<sup>75</sup>

### **Mitigating Negative Effects of Job Loss**

For families, the most readily apparent impact of job loss and unemployment is a reduction in income. Workers who become unemployed through no fault of their own may receive unemployment insurance benefits, supported primarily through a tax on employers. This temporary financial assistance typically provides up to 50 percent

of prior weekly earnings, but the amount and duration are determined by state law. Following the 2007 recession, the length of time during which people could receive benefits was temporarily extended beyond the usual 26 weeks in most states. In addition, those without a job may receive employment and training services—including job-search and job-placement assistance, job counseling and assessment, vocational training, and support services—through federal funds from the Workforce Investment Act that are disbursed to states to help unemployed and dislocated workers find new jobs. Programs for dislocated workers, however, are among the least effective of public employment and training services. Research shows that they have modest effects on employment and are unlikely to help workers fully recover their lost earnings.<sup>76</sup>

In addition, our policy responses to job loss do not recognize or address the documented negative effects on other family members that are associated with the stress of job loss, and its implications for family functioning. Job counseling is available to the worker, but other support services are typically limited to individual, work-oriented supports such as transportation assistance. To better cope with stress and mitigate job loss's negative effects on children, family members may need psychological and family counseling, alcohol and drug abuse counseling, preventive health care (because they've lost health-care benefits), and food and nutritional assistance.<sup>77</sup>

### **Policy Recommendations**

What new policies, or improvements to existing policies, would better support working parents, promote the positive effects of parents' work on children's wellbeing, and reduce the harmful consequences of parents'

work? The EITC, for example, is one of the most successful policies for supporting working families. The rate of participation is consistently high, and Congress recently expanded benefits for larger families and married couples. In addition, about half the U.S. states have enacted their own earned income credit policies that include expectations and incentives for parents to work. But although community outreach and tax programs for low-income workers have helped lower the costs of filing and receiving the benefit, an estimated 15 to 25 percent of eligible families are not claiming the EITC.<sup>78</sup> One way to get more families to claim the credit might be to simplify tax filing by consolidating the EITC with other tax provisions for families (for example, the Child and Dependent Care Credit) into a single credit, while also raising the income level at which benefits phase out to increase the level of support the credit provides for working parents.<sup>79</sup>

There are other opportunities to promote healthier working families and improve children's wellbeing. The United States stands apart from other developed countries in its near absence of policies that mandate employee work supports. Instead, U.S. employers determine on their own to what extent and to which employees they grant work flexibility or other family-oriented benefits. The result is that low-income or low-skilled workers and single parents, who may need additional support the most to improve nurturing and care arrangements for their children, are least likely to get such support.

Though research confirms that the first three to six months of an infant's life constitute a particularly sensitive time for the child's development and for bonding with caregivers, it is not definitively established that the caregiver should be the mother, full time, in

every family. One policy option would be federally mandated paid leave for either mothers or fathers in the first weeks or months of a child's life. Since 2004, for example, California has mandated six weeks of partially paid leave (for a newborn, a foster or adopted child, or other family health needs), and this policy could be adopted nationwide. The latest research on California's leave policy shows substantial increases (three weeks on average) in use of maternity leave, with particularly large increases among less-educated, unmarried, and minority mothers. Studies in other countries such as Germany have not shown additional benefits for children (in terms of their educational success) or parents' income beyond six months of mandated parental leave, suggesting that a paid or partially paid leave of somewhere between six weeks and six months should be adequate to generate benefits for parents and children alike.<sup>80</sup>

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*Low-income or low-skilled workers and single parents, who may need additional support the most to improve nurturing and care arrangements for their children, are least likely to get such support.*

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An alternative to paid parental leave would be a fixed cash allowance provided by the federal government, or via federal cost-sharing with states, that would both augment and replace existing public investments in child care (that is, the Child and Dependent Care Credit, the

Exclusion for Employer-Provided Dependent Care Expenses, the Child Care and Development Fund, and the Title XX Social Services Block Grant) and let parents use the money either to purchase high-quality early child care or to offset the earnings they lose when they spend time out of the labor force after welcoming a new child into the family. This option would be more flexible for families. It could accommodate any adult family member's leave from employment to care for the child, and if the allowance were set at a fixed amount, it would cover a larger fraction of lost wages in families with lower income. In addition, families could make choices that would reflect their own circumstances, such as the availability of quality child-care providers, the implications of taking time off for their career progression, the age and health of other children in the family, and many others. Employers would be on equal footing nationally in terms of the costs of offering a basic family work support, and they could supplement the allowance with other benefits as their needs allowed. Like the EITC, the benefit could be phased out as family income increased.

How could a cash allowance be administered to ensure that children benefited from the funds? Parents could be required to document their leave from work (in conjunction with their employer), or if parents chose to use the allowance to purchase high-quality early child care, they could be required to document both their expenditures and the qualifications of the child-care provider. This type of work support should go hand in hand with more concerted policy efforts to inform parents about why choosing high-quality child care is important, to improve the information available to them so that they can make better choices, and to give them financial incentives to do so.

If implemented well, this type of flexible cash allowance should achieve the goal, articulated by David Blau, an economist and expert on child care policy, of subsidizing the costs of raising children “without favoring market child care costs over the forgone earnings cost of a parent who stays home to care for a child.”<sup>81</sup>

Another area of family work support policy where the United States is clearly out of step with both developed and developing countries across the globe is the mandatory provision of paid sick leave. Data from the March 2012 National Compensation Survey (NCS), which measures employee benefits, show that paid sick leave was offered to 66 percent of civilian workers and 61 percent of those working in private industry, but to just 52 percent of workers in small private firms (those with fewer than 100 employees), 40 percent of workers in private-sector service occupations, and barely a quarter of part-time workers.<sup>82</sup> At the same time, research suggests not requiring some minimal paid sick leave benefit brings high costs for families and society alike. A recent *Future of Children* article indicated that parents with access to paid sick leave were more than five times as likely to be able to care for their sick children. This was especially important for families with a chronically ill child, for whom lack of access to paid sick leave posed a substantial risk that parents would lose their jobs.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, research discussed earlier in this article provides convincing evidence of a strong connection between parents' and children's mental health, and a corresponding relationship between parents' involvement and responsiveness and children's cognitive achievement and behavior.

One option would be to elevate the provision of sick leave to be on par with the availability

of health care insurance coverage. For example, the Affordable Care Act provides for a Health Coverage Tax Credit for employers who provide health insurance to employees; employers deduct the costs of these benefits and get the added bonus of a tax credit. Without mandating sick leave, a similar credit could give employers an incentive to offer it.

The United States currently uses its tax code to spur employers to provide a range of other benefits, including educational and tuition assistance, life insurance, commuting assistance, and more; these are nontaxable for employees and deductible by the firm. However, access and participation by employees follow consistent patterns—they are lowest for workers in small firms and service occupations and highest for workers in large firms and government agencies, presumably because administrative costs are influenced by organization size and employee tenure.<sup>84</sup> One possibility would be to explore reducing the administrative burden, for example, by giving employers a single deduction based on the generosity of the dollar-equivalent value of the menu of benefits they offer combined with their employee participation rate. The CEA study discussed earlier noted that one of the reasons for discrepancies between employers and employees in reporting the availability of workplace flexibility and other benefits is that employers do not necessarily make these benefits available to all employees; less-skilled, lower-income workers are more likely to be left out. Economic theory, however, suggests that caution may be warranted: workers could ultimately bear a larger fraction of these costs if there are trade-offs between wage offers from employers and these benefits. Although we still lack empirical work on this issue, a recent study that examined employer contributions to 401(k) plans found that associated reductions in wages were

much less (in percentage terms) for low-income than for higher-income workers.<sup>85</sup>

For parents who lose their jobs, unemployment insurance provides some temporary financial relief. Employment and training services are minimally effective in helping them find new jobs and do not help to fully replace lost earnings. A number of possible reforms to the unemployment insurance system have been proposed, including some that would shift more resources toward workers with larger, long-term wage losses. One such alternative would replace unemployment insurance with a combination of wage loss insurance—which would supplement the earnings of workers who can find only lower-wage employment after losing a job—and temporary earnings replacement accounts, to which workers would also make contributions. A larger share of the current unemployment insurance system's resources would, in effect, be redirected toward helping those experiencing significant long-term wage losses to maintain their living standards, with a smaller share going to short-term cash assistance for those enduring more limited bouts of unemployment or wage loss. Analyses suggest that this type of reform would reach more low-income families and would likely also strengthen parents' incentives to find new employment.<sup>86</sup> In addition, the need-based payments that may currently accompany an individual's job search in workforce development programs could be made more flexible, so that they could be used for any family member's needs during the period of unemployment (for example, for family, psychological, or substance abuse counseling).

Finally, the articles in this issue of the *Future of Children* share a focus on two generations—parents and their children—and this discussion of parents' employment

and children's wellbeing has clearly shown how intimately and importantly parents' work participation is linked to their ability to effectively care for their children (and to their children's development). In this regard, policies that strengthen and support parents in their roles both as worker and parent could generate long-term benefits for the next generation, which in turn should advance the wellbeing of subsequent generations.<sup>87</sup>

One common model among programs that have an explicit two-generation focus includes three core components: high-quality early-childhood education; job training that gives parents opportunities to upgrade their workforce skills for high-demand occupations; and comprehensive family and peer support services.<sup>88</sup> The Tulsa County Career Advance program, in Oklahoma, initiated in 2009 by the Community Action Project (CAP), is an example of just such a two-generation intervention; it targets parents with children in Head Start and Early Head Start for workforce development services (see

the article in this issue by P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn). If these programs successfully help parents secure jobs with higher levels of job security, wages, and other attributes that improve how they feel about their work and the role models and encouragement they offer to their children, then the children may very well reap benefits beyond those associated with the education and stronger financial supports families realize through the programs. However, evaluations that are currently under way, such as the experimental evaluation of Enhanced Early Head Start, also point to difficulties in their implementation that may lessen these programs' effects.<sup>89</sup> As new, innovative strategies attempt to better engage parents, rigorous evaluations of these programs should continue, so that policy makers get the evidence they need to weigh these programs' costs and benefits, to assess whether they can be introduced more widely, and to determine their potential for net returns to society and to disadvantaged families.

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