

# Linking Parents' Work Stress to Children's and Adolescents' Psychological Adjustment

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## Abstract

Recent research indicates that parental work stress has implications for the quality of family interaction and, in turn, children's and adolescents' adjustment. Studies in two distinct genres are reviewed: investigations relying on global reports of work demands, family dynamics, and child and adolescent adjustment and studies focusing on within-person comparisons of family interaction on days characterized by high and low work stress. The effects of parental work stress on children's and adolescents' adjustment appear to be indirect. Work stress is linked to parents' feelings of overload and strain, which in turn predict lower parent-child acceptance and higher conflict, processes that in turn are related to less positive adjustment of children and adolescents. In the face of high work stress, withdrawing from family involvement may be adaptive in the short run but ultimately problematic. The strength of these associations depends on parents' personality qualities, parents' coping styles, and work and family circumstances.

## Keywords

work-family spillover; child adjustment

From the 1930s until well into the 1980s, many developmental re-

searchers were preoccupied with the question of whether having a working mother was problematic for children. The focus on maternal employment status meant that researchers frequently ignored the specific nature of parents' work situations, as well as the fact that there are two sets of work circumstances that may impinge on a family in which both parents work: the mother's and the father's (Perry-Jenkins, Repetti, & Crouter, 2000). About 15 years ago, however, the field underwent a sea change. The growing consensus that maternal employment status per se did not represent a risk factor for children, coupled with increased interest in fathers' family roles, led researchers to pay greater attention to the implications of mothers' and fathers' occupational circumstances for their offspring. One strand of this body of research has focused on parents' experiences of stress on the job. These studies have asked questions such as "Does parents' work stress make a difference for the adjustment of children and adolescents, and, if so, through what processes?"

Within the body of research on the impacts of work stress on families and children, there are two distinct, complementary genres: (a) studies that rely on global assessments of parents' work stress, family dynamics, and children's or adolescents' psychosocial functioning and (b) investigations that focus on the implications of day-to-day variations in individuals' stressful

work experiences for family interactions. Studies in the global tradition are our primary focus here because they have considered the linkages between parents' work stress and children's and adolescents' adjustment. Studies of day-to-day variability in work stress are illuminating as well because they offer a window into how work-to-family emotional transmission may operate (Larson & Almeida, 1999). In this review, we describe research findings from both traditions and discuss individual characteristics and contextual conditions that appear to moderate these associations.

## GLOBAL ASSESSMENTS OF PARENTAL WORK STRESS

Parental work stress does not appear to exert direct effects on children's psychological functioning. Rather, "parents' work experiences indirectly influence children's behavior through their sequential effects on parents' work-related affect and parenting" (Stewart & Barling, 1996, p. 222). For example, in a study of Canadian two-parent, dual-earner families with adolescent offspring, Galambos, Sears, Almeida, and Kolaric (1995) tested a three-stage model relating work stress to adolescents' adjustment. The first stage involved the link between parents' occupational stress (i.e., working long hours and feeling overloaded) and their generalized feelings of stress. The second stage traced the association between general feelings of stress and relations between parents and their adolescents, including the warmth and conflict evident in these relations. The last stage concerned the connections between parent-adolescent relations and adolescents' problem behavior. For mothers, work overload led to increased overall stress, which in turn pre-

dicted lower warmth toward their adolescents; when mothers were less warm and accepting, adolescents, in turn, exhibited higher levels of problem behavior. For fathers, the linkages looked quite similar except that the aspect of parent-adolescent relations that linked paternal stress and adolescents' problem behavior was not acceptance, but father-adolescent conflict.

In a recent study with our colleagues (Crouter, Bumpus, Maguire, & McHale, 1999), we examined a similar set of linkages but analyzed data from mothers and fathers simultaneously. We investigated not only the implications of work pressure for a given parent, but also the implications of one parent's work pressure for the other parent's feelings of being overloaded. There were hints in the literature that wives tend to be responsive to husbands' work stress in ways that are not reciprocated by husbands, a theme echoed in our findings. The linkages between fathers' and mothers' own perceptions of work pressure (measured primarily in terms of work pace and deadlines) and adolescents' psychological adjustment resembled a series of upright dominos; knocking over the first domino set in motion a chain of associations that ultimately knocked over the last metaphorical domino in the row. Work pressure predicted mothers' own feelings of being overloaded; such feelings, in turn, were related to elevated levels of mother-adolescent conflict; and higher mother-adolescent conflict, in turn, predicted lower levels of psychological well-being for adolescents. For fathers, the domino chain was very similar, with one interesting exception. Fathers' work pressure predicted not only their own feelings of role overload but their wives' as well. Thus, fathers' experiences and perceptions of work pressure may be particularly influential in families because they are associated not only with fathers' feelings

of role overload but with mothers' as well, whereas mothers' work pressure is linked only to mothers' own feelings of overload.

Why are wives apparently more susceptible to their spouse's work-related stress than husbands are? We ruled out one possible answer to this question, namely, that because husbands tend to work longer hours than their wives, their work-related affect has less chance to be diluted by other experiences; the pattern of results was the same in families in which husbands worked much longer hours than their wives and in families in which spouses invested similar amounts of time at work (Crouter et al., 1999). Another possible explanation stems from the fact that even in families in which wives are employed full-time, husbands often earn more and are seen as the primary economic provider, a status that may give their work circumstances more visibility in the family. Wives, in contrast, often are still responsible for much of the housework and child care and perhaps cannot afford to stay focused on the strains of the workday. Another explanation focuses on physiological differences in how men and women respond to stress. Gottman and Levenson (1986) theorized that "males show a larger autonomic nervous system response to stress, respond more readily, and recover more slowly than females" (p. 45). This tendency may make men more likely than women to carry work stress home, where it can be noticed and reacted to by their wives.

#### WITHIN-PERSON VARIATIONS IN WORK STRESS

Studies focused on the implications of an individual's variations in

daily work stress enable researchers to fine-tune their understanding of work-family processes. In these studies, individuals, couples, or families are followed intensively over multiple days, with an eye to how fluctuations in the daily experience of work stress predict the quality of subsequent family interactions. In these investigations, work stress is usually measured in terms of work overload, tense, conflictual interactions with co-workers or supervisors, or both overload and negative interactions.

A study by Repetti (1989) exemplifies this type of research. Interested in the impact of daily stress, she focused on an occupation renowned for work pressure: air traffic control. She collected two kinds of data on daily work stress—air traffic controllers' reports of how stressful the day had been and objective data on daily air traffic conditions—and then linked these data to daily reports of marital interaction after work. Repetti found that marital interactions were more positive when wives enabled their air traffic controller husbands to withdraw from marital interaction following particularly stressful work days. These data led Repetti to propose that, at least in the short run, withdrawal from family interaction is an adaptive response to high levels of work stress.

Subsequently, Repetti and Wood (1997a) examined the connections between daily work stress and mother-child interaction at the end of the workday. By studying mothers whose children were enrolled in a work-site child-care program and focusing on mother-child reunions at the end of the workday, the researchers reduced the chances that other intervening experiences, such as a long commute, would alter the mothers' mood. Mothers tended to withdraw from both positive and negative interaction with their children on stressful workdays.

It is not always possible, however, to withdraw. Analysis of daily diary data completed on 42 consecutive evenings revealed that, for both husbands and wives, on days when they experienced high levels of both work stress and home stress, parent-adolescent tension escalated, a finding that echoes themes from studies that have employed global assessments of work stress (Almeida & McDonald, 1998).

### WHAT MODERATES THESE ASSOCIATIONS?

The extent to which work stressors spill over to influence employees' interactions with family members is likely to depend on a host of moderating conditions (Perry-Jenkins et al., 2000). Studies focused on day-to-day variability in work stress have paid attention to these conditions, but studies in the global tradition generally have not.

One factor that may moderate the linkages between work stress and children's and adolescents' adjustment is the different personality qualities and coping styles that mothers and fathers bring to their work and family lives. Some studies have found exaggerated emotional responses to daily stressors, including work stressors, among individuals with high levels of depression or anxiety. Similarly, there is a higher association between daily work stress and less positive mother-child interactions among women who describe themselves as high on Type A qualities (e.g., aggressive, driven) than among other women (Repetti & Wood, 1997a).

Coping and stress-management styles are also likely to moderate the extent to which men and women transmit work-related stress. A study of single mothers raising adolescents, for example,

found that mothers were less likely to transmit anxious feelings to their adolescent offspring if the mothers spent more time alone (Larson & Gillman, 1999). Time alone may give mothers a chance to manage their negative emotions and, in so doing, break the cycle of transmitting negative emotion within the family.

Family and work contexts also play a role in shaping the relative strength of the connections between work stress and subsequent family interactions. Almeida, Wethington, and Chandler (1999) found that the connections between stress at home and at work and mother-child tension were stronger for mothers who were raising adolescents than for mothers bringing up younger children, even though mothers reported higher overall rates of negative interactions with younger children than with adolescents. In addition, the tendency for mothers and fathers to experience tense parent-child interactions on days when they also experienced other stressors was confined to families in which the mothers worked full-time. When mothers worked less than full-time, daily stressors were not associated with mother-child or father-child tension. Almeida et al. speculated that working fewer hours may give mothers more time and energy to manage their own emotions and the emotional undercurrents in their families, with subsequent benefits not only for their own interactions with offspring but for their husbands' interactions as well. Full-time employment is such a normative role for fathers that studies have not asked whether fathers take advantage of working fewer hours to manage their own emotions and the emotional undercurrents in their families, or if this effect is confined to mothers, who are often seen as the emotion-management specialists in families.

### NEXT STEPS

The studies reviewed here employed nonexperimental designs, which cannot determine causal relationships between work stress, family dynamics, and children's and adolescents' adjustment. Putting together the two strands of research—the studies relying on global reports and investigations focusing on day-to-day variability in work stress—reveals a plausible picture of how these processes may operate. Work that is highly demanding in terms of time, deadlines, pace, negative interactions with co-workers and supervisors, or some combination of these factors may lead parents to feel distressed or overloaded. Fathers' work stress appears to be associated not only with fathers' own feelings of overload but with their wives' feelings as well. One response of overloaded parents may be to withdraw from family interaction. This may be a satisfactory short-term strategy, but in the long run, a parent who is chronically stressed at work and withdrawn at home may be seen by other family members as inaccessible and disengaged. Repetti and Wood (1997b) predicted that when parents exhibit a chronic pattern of withdrawal, "there will be protests and resistance" (p. 210) as children escalate their bids for attention and as partners push for change. Researchers know little, however, about the dividing line between adaptive and maladaptive patterns of withdrawal in the face of exposure to work stress. The literature relying on global reports of work stress and family processes suggests that some parents may respond to high levels of role overload by becoming less accepting of their children and engaging in more conflict, relationship dynamics that ultimately may erode children's psychological adjustment.

Given widespread concern that work is more time-consuming and

demanding than ever, it is imperative to learn more about how parental work stress makes its mark on families, children, and adolescents. There are many exciting avenues for future research. One is to examine work stress in the context of other dimensions of work, including positive dimensions. For example, some stressful jobs entail high levels of autonomy and complexity, occupational characteristics associated with stimulating home environments for children (Parcel & Menaghan, 1994). It is important to learn more about these trade-offs.

Family conflict and withdrawal are the two family processes that have received the most attention, but it is also possible that work stress impinges on other parenting domains, such as the ability to maintain firm and consistent standards for children's behavior or to stay knowledgeable about children's daily experiences, aspects of parenting that have implications for children's psychosocial functioning. Work stress may also be confounded in important ways with parents' characteristics (e.g., motivation to achieve) or with children's exposure to settings outside the family (e.g., overreliance on after-school care), factors that exert their own effects on children.

In addition, more research is needed on how parents cope with work stress. Larson and Gillman (1999), for example, found that mothers heading single-parent households were less likely to transmit anxiety to their adolescent offspring if the mothers spent more time alone, but, interestingly, anxiety transmission was not moder-

ated by social support. Identifying the conditions that impede the transmission of negative affect would pave the way for prevention-oriented studies.

Finally, little is known about the role of individual differences in children and adolescents. Are children who are particularly challenging (e.g., children who are highly demanding, very active, or very emotionally labile) at increased risk of experiencing negative family fallout when their parents experience job stress? Is it helpful to children and adolescents if they are able to attribute their parents' negative mood or irritable behavior to a bad day at work, rather than, for example, to something they themselves did or said?

As knowledge accumulates, a goal should be to create intervention programs for parents, particularly those employed in stressful occupations. These programs should help parents recognize how they respond emotionally to work stress and give them effective strategies for minimizing the possible corrosive effects of those negative emotions on family interaction.

### Recommended Reading

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### Note

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