

## RESEARCH PAPER

### THE WAY WE WORK: HOW CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES FARE IN A 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY WORKPLACE

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#### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, researchers, the media, and policymakers have struggled to examine the shifting dynamics of work and family and to better understand the implications of these changes for American life. Most experts can agree that American families have changed. We no longer fit the June and Ward Cleaver model. In 1960, 70 percent of American families with children had at least one parent home full-time. By 2000, this trend has been completely reversed. Today, nearly 70 percent of families are headed by either two working parents or a single working parent.<sup>1</sup> The notion of a breadwinner and a wife may have defined the intersection of family and work in the past. But today's realities demonstrate that for most families, this is no longer true.

Similarly, the nature of work in America has changed, with a 9-to-5 workday quickly becoming a relic of the past.<sup>2</sup> Families are now struggling to integrate into a global economy that operates on a 24/7 schedule. Today men and women in America are working more than most other workers in the industrialized world. Nevertheless, the concept of the "ideal worker" – someone available at all times, without family responsibilities – dominates today's workplace culture, pulling moms and dads further into the workforce.<sup>3</sup>

But workplaces are doing little to help parents maintain their role in and connection to the family. And public policies have yet to catch up in giving parents some flexibility when trying to navigate work and family responsibilities. So, parents end up carrying the burden on their own. In numerous polls, Americans say that time pressures on working families are getting worse, not better. A recent poll conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research and Public Opinion Strategies for the New America Foundation Work & Family Program asked about families who are working more but still finding it difficult to earn enough to pay their bills and spend time with their family. Seventy percent of those polled thought that this situation was getting worse instead of better.<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, public policies to support parents and their children have not kept pace with the changing workforce and the increased demands of the workplace. Often, parents working full-time lack the flexibility they need to meet the demands of family. As a result, children come home from school to empty houses and stay at home by themselves when they are sick. Other parents work part-time, or have patched together a work schedule that affords them more time to address family responsibilities. But these parents tend to earn less, lack health care

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coverage and pension benefits, and jeopardize their social security benefits by working fewer hours, or not at all, when their children need them at home. Given that workplaces have failed to respond and policies are not yet in place to support families, the burdens of navigating 21<sup>st</sup> century work and family life have been left for parents to figure out on their own.

So what are the implications of this modern day reality for the well-being of families and children? Despite parents' clear sense that they are being squeezed for time and resources, the research on family impacts is less straightforward. Most studies have looked only at the implications of maternal employment on children's health, school success, and development—this is, whether mothers are in or out of the labor force. Most of these studies have found mixed results when looking at the consequences of women's entrance into the labor force over the past 30 years.<sup>5</sup>

But this lack of consistent findings does not mean that employment, and the ways in which mothers (or fathers) work, leaves children unaffected. By looking simply at employment, too much of this research has ignored the characteristics of work and the workplace that have been shown in other bodies of literature to have consequences for children's outcomes. More detailed studies find that maternal employment does indeed influence children's outcomes, but in multiple ways that depend on the specifics of families' lives and often through intervening factors that work to counterbalance each other.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the characteristics and quality of work, the dynamics of job stability, and wages can all impact the well-being of children.

It is also becoming increasingly clear that these work characteristics cannot be studied in isolation. For example, in looking at long work hours, Rosalind Chait Barnett at Brandeis University has pointed out that it is hard, in isolation, to say whether or not long hours are harmful to families. Often, jobs with long hours are the “good jobs” with benefits and high pay.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, jobs with fewer hours could potentially be harmful for children since these positions often come with decreased wages and few or no benefits. Barnett argues that it is the nature of the work that parents do – “more control and autonomy in a supportive environment” – that matters more than simply the number of hours that parents work.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, studies have tried to disaggregate the effects of employment – specifically increased earnings – versus the effects of available time parents have with their children. Recent evaluations of welfare-to-work programs for example, show that income – rather than employment or hours of maternal work – may be a more critical driver of low-income children's well-being.<sup>9</sup> It is clear that all of these factors – employment, earnings, work characteristics, as well as family characteristics and family needs – have implications for the well-being of children. Yet often these issues are interconnected and difficult to disentangle within the lives of working families. More research is needed to better understand how these issues, as well as workplace characteristics for both mothers and fathers, ultimately affect families and children.

Despite these limitations, there are important findings that highlight what happens to families and children when work fails to support parents—from impacts on marriage to direct effects on children's cognitive development.

These data often suggest possible ways that our workplaces and public policies can respond more flexibly to meet the needs of today's working parents. Flexibility in this context means a broad set of options that affect the two equally important priorities with which parents struggle: time and money. As a goal, this flexibility would give parents' control and choice in how they manage work and family responsibilities—from control over their schedules, to time off to attend to family needs, to quality child care choices for their children while they work.

In this paper, we highlight the growing body of research that looks at the specific issue of how we work and the subsequent implications for families and children. We want to better understand how children's well-being is influenced by these changing dynamics of family and work and to explore the implications for parents who all too often have to make trade-offs between work and family.

Pulling from the most up-to-date research, we begin by providing a brief overview of several key demographic trends that help us better understand why the tension between work and family continues to grow. We then look at the impacts of work on parents and the family, including effects on marriage and parenting styles. We examine the implications for children and their well-being, including the direct effects of parents' working conditions on their development, as well as indirect effects through the quality of care they receive while their parents are at work. We discuss the policy context in which to understand these findings, highlighting the lack of flexibility in the workplace and the limited choices today's parents face. Finally, we conclude by outlining policies that may alleviate many of the problems created by this 21<sup>st</sup> century work and family disconnect.

### **KEY DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS AFFECTING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

Today, families with children in America are predominantly headed by either two working parents or a single working parent. This reality is a product of one of the most notable demographic shifts in the past 40 years; specifically, the increased labor force participation by mothers with children. Between 1970 and 2001, the percentage of mothers in the workforce rose from 38 to 67 percent.<sup>10</sup> And for mothers of young children this shift has been even more dramatic. The labor force participation of women with children under age 6 has more than doubled (from 24 percent in 1960 to 65 percent in 2000.)<sup>11</sup>

The working hours of families have also changed. While the number of hours worked has not shifted much on average across the United States, research shows that parents in particular have not followed the average trends. In 1970, couples with children worked a combined 77 hours per week in all jobs. By 2000, the number of hours increased to 80 hours per week. This increase is the equivalent of adding one month of full-time work each year for working families.<sup>12</sup> Not surprisingly, it is the work hours of mothers that have largely driven this increase. Further, families also worked more weeks per year on the job. In 2000, the average married couple family with children worked an additional 12 weeks per year compared to similar families in 1969.<sup>13</sup> Finally, more than ever before significant numbers of parents are working very long hours. In 2000, nearly 1 out of every 8 couples with children was putting in 100 hours a week or more on the job, compared to only 1 out of 12 families in 1970.<sup>14</sup>

To be sure, increased labor force participation by women and increased hours worked by families has helped increase the incomes in these households. And usually, when incomes rise, children are better off. Recent studies, however, suggest that much of this increased time generates little additional income for many low- and middle-income families.<sup>15</sup> Instead, these hours are needed just to hold steady against rising costs and declining wages.

We also find that as these changes have occurred, our 24/7 economy has been driving a shift in when work gets done. The “standard workweek” – defined as 35 to 40 hours, 5 days a week, Monday through Friday – is clearly a relic of the past. Using this definition, only 29 percent of Americans fit this mold.<sup>16</sup> Instead, workers are showing up for work on weekends and in the evenings. Often called “nonstandard” hours, research shows that “one-fifth of all employed people in the US work most of their hours in the evenings, during nights, on weekends, on a rotating schedule or have highly variable hours.”<sup>17</sup> Many parents are working these schedules. One third of dual-income, married couples with children include at least one spouse working a nonstandard schedule. In 26 percent of married–couple families with just one worker, the spouse works nonstandard hours.<sup>18</sup>

While this type of work in our economy may provide parents with more time during the day and could help accommodate caregiving for children, researchers stress that nonstandard hours most often create barriers rather than supports to navigating work and family life. Many of the benefits of these schedules are short term, while many of the negative consequences have more long-term effects. So for example, couples that split shifts might avoid low quality, high cost child care situations in the short term. Yet these couples are also more likely to have lower marital satisfaction and are at greater risk of separation and divorce. Further, there is little evidence that workers actually prefer these schedules. Over 60 percent of workers said that they worked these schedules because they could not get any other job, the hours were mandated by the employer, or the nature of the job required the schedule.<sup>19</sup>

## **EFFECTS OF WORK ON PARENTS AND FAMILIES**

Work’s impacts on parents have significant repercussions for the ways in which families function as well as for children’s developmental outcomes. As a result, inflexible work environments create both stress and trade-offs for parents that eventually trickle down to the well-being of children. It is important then to examine what effects parents feel as they try to find the time and resources to be both a good parent and a quality worker in this new economy.

We know from extensive research that employment itself can be beneficial to parents, especially to mothers’ level of satisfaction and mental well-being. Across a variety of studies, mothers who were employed scored lower on psychosomatic symptoms, measures of depression, and a variety of other stress indicators.<sup>20</sup>

But a growing body of work has begun to explore the effects of work demands, schedules, and other characteristics that affect employees, and more specifically, parents. In addition to whether parents work, we know that how parents interact with the workplace can determine whether or not their experiences managing work

and family are positive or negative. For example, while work-family conflict can be exacerbated by workplace conditions such as long hours and heavy job demands, the workplace can also help reduce conflict when workers have access to family-friendly policies, are given flexibility and control of how and when they work, and are granted more autonomy in the workplace.<sup>21</sup>

Workplaces that provide these types of supports, however, are in short supply. When work and family responsibilities are out of balance, there can be significant impacts on mothers and fathers and the positive effects of employment can erode. A report by the Families and Work Institute (FWI) shows that in 2002, 45 percent of employees reported that work and family responsibilities interfered with each other “a lot” or “some”.<sup>22</sup> For many parents, these work and family tensions are on the rise. A full 67 percent of employed parents today say they do not have enough time with their children and 63 percent of married employees say they do not have enough time with their spouse. Over half of all employees say they do not have enough time for themselves.<sup>23</sup>

### **Stress on Parents from Work/Family Conflict**

Researchers often examine this “work-family conflict” in order to both describe the conditions for creating this conflict as well as to quantify its effects. Not surprisingly, parenthood is the most consistent characteristic that predicts whether or not an employee feels this conflict.<sup>24</sup> And it is clear that mothers and fathers both pay a price when trying to manage work and family responsibilities.

Research identifies several characteristics at the workplace that contribute to this conflict, including “frequent overtime, excessive work, afternoon shifts, physically or mentally demanding work, inflexible work hours, and inability to leave work for emergencies.”<sup>25</sup> Other studies point to parents’ stress in dealing with excessive work hours (over 40 hours per week), mandatory overtime, shift work, unsupportive supervisors, and health and safety problems at work.<sup>26</sup> Finally, jobs with heavy workloads, time pressures, high stress and conflict, as well as those with schedule inflexibility have been linked to greater work-family conflict for parents.<sup>27</sup>

This type of work-related stress has significant implications for parents’ well-being and their ability to care for their children. The research is clear that when parents experience work-family conflict, the impacts on the family can be serious. Several studies have suggested that mothers are negatively affected by inflexible work schedules. Most notably, research has linked depression among women with the lack of workplace flexibility.<sup>28</sup> Another set of studies has connected the difficulties of finding child care with lower psychological well-being for parents.<sup>29</sup> Long work hours can also lead to detrimental effects on children, but their impact is transmitted through parents’ attitudes and way of coping with this work demand. Specifically, when long work hours create negative maternal attitudes, children tend to display more negative behaviors.<sup>30</sup> The availability of flexible work schedules made a difference in maternal attitudes, and consequently in children’s behaviors.<sup>31</sup>

Impacts of work stresses on fathers are less researched; often because of a cultural belief that women, more than men, have more of the responsibility and spend more time worrying about their families. Recent studies, however,

have shown that fathers struggle just as much with work-family conflict as mothers do.<sup>32</sup> And it appears that fathers are more likely to carry these feelings of conflict over to their relationships and interactions at home. Fathers are less likely to report being drained at work due to family obligations, but are just as likely as mothers to feel drained at home because of work pressures.<sup>33</sup>

More recently, a study from Brandeis University looked at working parents with school-age children and found that those with greater stress about their children's after-school arrangements reported significantly lower psychological well-being.<sup>34</sup> In fact, parents with high levels of what the researchers call "parental after school stress" are more than four and a half times as likely to score low on tests of psychological well-being than parents who have low levels of parental stress. The researchers also found that there is a lose-lose situation when parents of school-age children have high levels of stress. In addition to the negative effects for families, the workplace also suffers through increased absenteeism (missing as many as five extra days of work compared to coworkers with low parental stress) and decreased productivity.<sup>35</sup>

Parents' psychological well-being is important, since research has linked their well-being to child and family outcomes. Research has consistently shown that better maternal mental health is connected with more effective parenting as well as better cognitive outcomes and emotional adjustment for children.<sup>36</sup> So when parents, particularly mothers, are in situations in which they cannot decrease the conflict they feel between work responsibilities and family needs, the well-being of parents and, consequently, the well-being of children, suffers.

### **Effects on Family Life**

Working parents know that time is a precious resource. There are only so many hours in the day, and these days, it seems that this resource continues to shrink. Phrases such as the "time bind," the "time crunch," and the "overworked American" permeate our dialogue and way of thinking about our lives. For families working in inflexible workplaces, the reality of time demands from the workplace translates into real implications for the time they spend at home. Research has documented the extent to which families are feeling the time crunch and what impacts work is having on family life.

So what has been the impact of this dramatic shift of mothers from home to the workplace? Surprisingly, these studies largely show that mothers' entrance into the workforce did not have a major impact on the amount of time mothers spent with their children.<sup>37</sup> In 1965, mothers reported spending an average of 5.3 hours a day caring for children, and in 1998, they report 5.5 hours a day.<sup>38</sup> They accomplished this largely by cutting back on activities such as sleep, housework, leisure pursuits, and personal care. In fact, working mothers lose the equivalent of one night of sleep a week compared to mothers who are not in the paid labor force.<sup>39</sup>

Further, researchers found mothers' labor force participation changed not only their lives, but also influenced how fathers spend their time with the family. For example, fathers have increased the amount of time spent caring for their children. In 1965, fathers reported only one quarter of the time mothers spent in providing direct child care.

By 1998, they reported 56 percent as much time as mothers.<sup>40</sup> This shift is attributed largely to increased labor force participation by mothers and the increased hours mothers dedicate to the paid labor force.<sup>41</sup> In examining the impacts of these changes, researchers agree that the expanded role fathers are playing at home, particularly when fathers increase their share of child care, has had significant positive effects on children's outcomes.<sup>42</sup>

Other changes in how families spend their time have also occurred as a result of new work realities. Mothers have reduced the number of hours on housework, while fathers have increased their time in this activity. In 1965, mothers spent an average of 32 hours on housework while fathers spent 4 hours per week in this activity. By 2000, mothers had reduced their housework to 19 hours per week while the time spent by fathers rose to 10 hours weekly.<sup>43</sup>

This expanded role for fathers is believed to have several consequences for children, ranging from affecting children's stereotyped attitudes about sex roles to actually enhancing children's cognitive abilities. It is unclear, however, exactly why fathers' time has these effects. Some research suggests that fathers' time increases the child's overall adult-child interactions while other research states that fathers' time with children creates cognitive benefits because their time compensates for the decreased interaction the child has with the mother. Still other studies suggest that there are specific and unique benefits for children when they interact with their fathers.<sup>44</sup>

As the dynamics of time both fathers and mothers spend with their family change, most parents still struggle to find and create meaningful time together. Indeed the literature suggests that established family routines and rituals have a positive impact on children's outcomes. For example, research shows that when families have dinner together three or four times a week and have weekend and holiday rituals, the children tend to do better in school and have lower levels of anxiety than children in families without these routines.<sup>45</sup> Another study examining low-income mothers found that children experienced negative effects from their mother's employment partly through increased irregularity of routines.<sup>46</sup>

Yet several studies point to the difficulty parents have in creating and maintaining routines and rituals when they work long hours or nontraditional schedules. In one of the few studies that examines parents' work schedules, research shows that families working evenings and rotating shifts are less likely to have dinner with their children than parents working during the day.<sup>47</sup> Working weekends was associated with fathers spending about an hour more per day at paid employment and about 30 minutes less with their children compared to their counterparts who did not work weekends.<sup>48</sup> Other research has confirmed that low-income families, in particular, have a difficult time creating these structured family experiences because of rigid work schedules, long commutes, and social services schedules that do not conform to their lives.<sup>49</sup>

## **Implications for Parenting Behavior**

Parenting styles and parenting behavior have been linked to work in several ways. First, emotional well-being and lack of work-life conflict is connected to parenting behaviors.<sup>50</sup> As noted previously, employment itself can have some positive benefits for parents' emotional well-being. Other research has found that employment, particularly maternal employment, has some benefits for parenting style.

Specifically, one study of low- and middle-income families found that compared to mothers outside the paid labor force, employed mothers tended to rely less on authoritarian, power-assertive disciplinary styles. This style of parenting was linked to better outcomes for children. The study went on to conclude that children in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades with mothers using less authoritarian disciplinary measures were more likely to achieve higher scores on reading and math.<sup>51</sup> These linkages were especially evident in single parent families. There is also evidence that employed mothers treat sons and daughters more similarly than mothers outside the labor force, especially in their styles of control and their goals for the children, including the goal of independence, which employed mothers tend to value more than mothers who stay at home.<sup>52</sup>

But when work fails to support mothers and fathers or provides situations that create increased work-family conflict, then workplaces can be a source of stress and, as a consequence, can affect how parents interact with and relate to their children. In general, studies show that when work stresses create a feeling of “overload” for parents, their parenting is less effective. As a result, adolescents and young children's psychological adjustment and behavior are negatively affected. One study found that when parents have a day filled with high workloads, both mothers and fathers demonstrate more negative parenting behaviors when they arrive at home. Specifically, these parents were more withdrawn from their children both in behavior and in their emotional connections with their children.<sup>53</sup>

Other studies highlight the impact of job complexity on parenting behavior. Mothers who work in jobs that are repetitive, less stimulating, and lacking in room for self-direction often overemphasize obedience and downplay initiative when dealing with their children.<sup>54</sup> Another study linked these types of jobs to a deterioration in the home environment, particularly for single mothers. So even the complexity of our work can influence our behavior as parents and, subsequently, the outcomes for children.

Several studies have examined the links of work and family for fathers. For example, studies of fathers in dual-income families points to the interaction effects of work schedules and parents' perceptions of work-family conflict. These findings show the detrimental impacts on relationships with their children when fathers feel “overloaded” and are working long hours. Specifically, when fathers felt overworked (defined as paid employment of more than 60 hours a week) and overloaded (fathers subjective perceptions of being overwhelmed) they were less likely to be accepting of their children, less able to share their children's perspectives, and overall had less positive relationships with their children.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, the impact of work hours and the conflict that this schedule produces have been linked to negative parenting behaviors for the father.

Finally, a few additional studies have highlighted the direct effects of work on parenting behavior, particularly for the interaction of mothers with their young children. Results from the Study of Early Child Care by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) found that mothers who returned to work 30 or more hours a week when their child was still very young (under 9 months of age) scored lower on tests of sensitivity than those mothers who did not work this extensively at this stage of their newborn's development.<sup>56</sup> Additional studies looking at the return to work after parental leaves confirm that mothers taking shorter leaves (6 weeks) had more negative feelings and behavior than mothers who took longer leaves (12 weeks).<sup>57</sup> It is clear from these findings that the way in which parents work, and the timing of the return to work following the birth of a child, have important implications for parenting behavior and, as we will discuss later, for child outcomes.

### **Stress on Marriage**

Another way work can affect a family's well-being is its implications for marriage. Recently, there has been a large body of research looking at the benefits of marriage for children. Missing from this research, however, is a discussion on how effectively work and workplaces help in supporting marriage. Clearly, marriage and a person's marital satisfaction depend on a variety of complex factors that affect both husbands and wives. Most studies that examine maternal employment have found no overall effects on marital satisfaction.<sup>58</sup>

More sophisticated examinations, however, find that certain characteristics of work, as well as the way that work is viewed within a marriage, can have an impact on marital satisfaction. Researchers point out that when employment conflicts with the "ideal role" spouses have for each other, marital satisfaction can be affected. Specifically, studies have found negative effects of work on marriage when there are differing gender role attitudes within a marriage, when there is resentment of the employment by either parent, when the couples studied are low income, or when the father is surveyed. Conversely, a positive effect of work on marriage is found when the couples surveyed are educated or middle-class; when the mothers want to work; when the work is part-time; or when the mother is surveyed.<sup>59</sup>

The few studies that have examined more closely the connection between specific work characteristics and marriage have found that how parents work does indeed make a difference in their marriages. For example, several studies have confirmed that working nonstandard schedules can have a negative impact on marriage stability.<sup>60</sup> In fact, for couples with children, working night and rotating shifts has been found to significantly increase marital instability. Over a five-year period, separation or divorce is about six times higher among couples in which fathers work at nights, and three times as high when mothers worked nights.<sup>61</sup>

## EFFECTS OF WORK ON CHILDREN

Several studies have provided direct links between parents' work characteristics and children's emotional, social, or cognitive well-being. For example, Jody Heymann at Harvard University found that children with poor educational outcomes were more likely to have parents with working conditions that made it difficult or impossible to help their children. Parents with children who scored in the bottom quartile in reading or math were likely to work nights or evenings or to lack paid leave from their jobs (such as vacation, sick leave, or other flexibility). She concludes that – even when controlling for factors such as family income, parental education, marital status, and the total number of hours a parent worked – the more parents are away in the afternoons and evenings, the more likely it was that their children fell to the bottom on achievement tests.<sup>62</sup>

Other research confirms the detrimental effects of parents' nonstandard work hours on children's development. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development's Study of Early Child Care report showed that children of mothers who had ever worked some nonstandard hours – evenings, nights, or variable schedules – had lower cognitive scores at ages up to three years than children whose mothers worked only standard hours.<sup>63</sup>

Further, some studies have looked at the particular effects of nonstandard work hours on low-income families. They found that mothers who worked nonstandard shifts tended to be on welfare and to work in the service sector. The same studies concluded that these mothers were more likely to have lower health insurance coverage and lower pay, despite the fact that they were more likely to be members of a union. The researchers found that the mothers working a nonstandard shift were more likely to report high levels of problem behavior and low levels of positive behavior for their two- to four-year-old children than those mothers who worked during the day.<sup>64</sup> The study team found that the connecting factor between nonstandard work hours to child outcomes was the mothers' parenting. That is, when work led mothers to feel irritable, angry, impatient, and dissatisfied with being a parent, children's behavior was negatively impacted.

More recent studies are beginning to delve even deeper into the implications of nonstandard hours. One study found that children under age three experienced negative cognitive outcomes when their mothers worked nonstandard hours, particularly if the nonstandard schedules begin in the first year of the child's life.<sup>65</sup> Older children are also affected. A similar study of school-age children found no negative consequences for cognitive development, but did find that maternal nonstandard hours may contribute to increased behavioral problems for these children.<sup>66</sup> Another examination of low-income families found that when combining nonstandard hours and shifting schedules, children showed more problem behaviors. However, when parents worked standard hours but had shifting schedules, children had fewer behavior problems and higher achievement scores.<sup>67</sup>

As mentioned previously, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development's (NICHD) Study of Early Child Care found that when mothers returned to work more than 30 hours a week when their child was still young (under 9 months of age) they had reduced sensitivity toward their child. The report goes on to show that the children of these mothers experienced negative, and potentially lasting, effects on aspects of their cognitive and

social development (e.g. school readiness, vocabulary scores, compliance).<sup>68</sup> There are several qualifying factors that lead to these conclusions, including the quality of child care, maternal sensitivity, and the family's socioeconomic status.<sup>69</sup> Similar findings in another large study showed negative impacts on children's cognitive development when mothers worked 21 hours or more a week in the child's first year of life. These findings held true for white children, but not for Hispanic or black children, and were particularly true for low-income families.<sup>70</sup> The resulting effects on children could be partially explained by a number of factors, including access to high quality child care, parental sensitivity, and the quality of the home environment. Nevertheless, the fact remains that outcomes for newborns were better when mothers were able to take longer period of leave from work.<sup>71</sup>

Finally, in light of welfare reform, there has been extensive research on the impact of work on children living in low-income families. These studies largely show that for preschool-aged and elementary school-aged children, employment can positively impact their school achievement and can help lower behavior problems. However, most studies conclude that these benefits only occur when both hours of paid employment as well as family income increases.<sup>72</sup> When employment fails to increase the financial resources available, then the effects of requiring parents to move from welfare to work on children were often mixed. These findings point to the importance of wages to children's overall outcomes.

#### **EFFECTS OF NON-PARENTAL CARE ON CHILDREN**

As parents' participation in work grows, children spend an increasing amount of time in some form of child care. In fact, approximately 80 percent of children under age five with an employed mother are in the care of someone other than their parents for an average of almost 40 hours a week. For school-age children, most spend the majority of their day at school, but almost 8.2 million spend an average of 22 hours a week in the care of someone other than their parents before or after school.<sup>73</sup>

The impacts of child care on children's development depend on the experiences of children in care. In an effort to understand these experiences, researchers have explored particular aspects of child care, including the quality of care, the quantity of care being provided, and the type of child care setting used. Overall findings suggest that all of these factors contribute to child developmental outcomes. Studies show that in general children benefit cognitively from high quality child care, and in particular from care provided in child care centers.<sup>74</sup> The number of hours in care might also carry consequences for children, with one study finding long hours in care associated with increased problem behaviors for some children. The findings on time in care, however, are mixed. And it is still unclear whether long hours carry any lasting negative consequences for children.<sup>75</sup>

Recent research has found that for parents working nonstandard schedules, child care arrangements for young children become more complex.<sup>76</sup> Sometimes these types of schedules can help facilitate more parent care, especially when parents work different shifts. Yet working split shifts can have a negative net impact on children if this type of schedule contributes to less stable marriages, as the research has shown.<sup>77</sup> In other instances,

nonstandard work can lead to the patching together of care by parents, as well as the use of multiple caregiving arrangements, which can have detrimental effects on children if they cannot maintain stable attachments to their caregivers.

We also know mothers working nonstandard hours tend to use father care (for married couple families) or less formal care by other relatives and non-relatives.<sup>78</sup> One reason for this trend is that for parents working nonstandard hours, finding licensed child care arrangements can be nearly impossible. By and large, most licensed settings do not provide care during nonstandard hours. The limited research on the availability of care found that only 10 percent of centers and 6 percent of regulated family child care homes offered weekend care. And only 3 percent of centers and 13 percent of family child care homes offered evening care for children.<sup>79</sup>

The bad news is that many of these studies reveal that finding high quality care, especially for young children, is difficult. The National Institute for Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care found that almost 60 percent of the observed child care arrangements were of poor or mediocre quality.<sup>80</sup> Children in low-income families are even less likely to be in good or excellent care settings.

For school-age children, after-school programs meet some of the demands of working parents, but not nearly enough. A 1997 General Accounting Office report estimated that by 2002, as little as 20 percent of the demand for after-school programs would be met in some urban areas.<sup>81</sup> A more recent national survey estimates that only 11 percent of school-age children needing after-school care were receiving it.<sup>82</sup> The effects of after-school programs on children's development has also been mixed, with studies showing positive, neutral, and negative effects, largely depending on a variety of family factors, program quality, and the quantity of care being provided.

As a consequence of parents' work demands, school-age children can end up spending a significant portion of their time alone. In 1999, self-care, sometimes called latchkey care, was reported as the primary caregiving arrangement for over 3.3 million children.<sup>83</sup> For some children, self-care can be a positive step in developing independence and learning to function without adult supervision. When it occurs in limited amounts; in safe neighborhoods; is accompanied by parental monitoring; and is used by children old enough to emotionally handle the responsibilities of care, then self-care is not linked to poor academic achievements or social outcomes for children.

But for young children, children living in unsafe neighborhoods, and children from low-income families, it is clear that self-care could lead to harmful development when children lack the maturity or judgment to care for themselves. For example, one study shows that children whose mothers reported more unsupervised care for children in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grades were less likely to be deemed socially competent by their teachers in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Another set of findings highlighted that children who spent more time alone at ages 10 and 12 reported more depression than children who spent less time alone.<sup>84</sup> These findings suggest that self-care represents a missed opportunity for children, especially at-risk children.

Finally, children derive cognitive benefits from structured extracurricular activities. Time spent in organized sports, music, or art lessons has been linked with higher grades and higher standardized test scores for children in middle childhood (ages 6-12). Yet these types of activities usually require a commitment of time from parents – usually providing transportation to and from lessons, practice, and events. In addition, most of these activities require a fee. As a result, many children, particularly those from low-income families, are less likely to participate in these types of activities.<sup>85</sup> Other research on low-income parents also finds a relationship between parents' work and children's participation in extracurricular activities. Specifically, school-age children with married parents are less likely to participate in extracurricular activities if one parent works the night shift, but are more likely to participate if one parent works full-time and the other works part-time.<sup>86</sup>

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY**

As we have discussed above, there are significant impacts of work on families and children. The effects are felt first by parents, who struggle to manage work and family demands. In a variety of ways, through the well-being of parents' own lives, the ways in which the family functions, the behaviors of parents, and impacts on marriage, parents' work has significant repercussions for children. The research also provides evidence of the implications of parents' work characteristics on children's development, either directly or through the impacts of children's experiences while their parents are working.

It is clear that employment and work can be a positive force in the lives of families and children. But when work creates tensions for families, the implications for children can be serious. All too often, parents are left with few choices and are forced to make harsh trade-offs when it comes to work and family. But the research also points to ways in which these negative aspects of work on families and children can be mitigated. Opportunities to provide more autonomy and flexible schedules for parents, expanded child care choices, and access to parental leave and other paid time off would help parents better navigate their work and family responsibilities with less work-family conflict.

It is important to point out that these solutions are available in too few businesses and accessible to far too few parents. While 43 percent of wage and salaried employed say they have access to flextime, research has also documented that flexible arrangements and benefits tend to be more available in larger and more profitable firms, and then to the most valued professional and managerial workers.<sup>87</sup> In addition, employees report they do not use opportunities offered by employers to work flexible work schedules because of managerial resistance, organizational cultures that discourage their use, and organizational practices that might limit job advancement or pay increases.<sup>88</sup> In fact, the Families and Work Institute found in 2002 that 43 percent of employed parents said that using flexibility would jeopardize their advancement.<sup>89</sup>

The irony of work and flexibility is that often the parents that need it most lack access to these benefits and supports. A study from the Economic Policy Institute shows that for most low-income mothers, flexibility in determining work schedules and control over their schedule is rare. This study also points out that that single

parents, especially mothers, tend to work in jobs with particularly rigid schedules and lower salaries. Further, race seems to be a contributing factor in who has access to flexible jobs, with black workers having more rigid schedules than white workers of the same sex.<sup>90</sup>

Many parents also lack any paid time off – including sick leave, vacation time, or personal days – to help them in caring for their families. Whether it is a visit to the doctor’s office, a sick child, a school meeting, or a snow day at school, many parents are unable to cope with family care and family crises without paying a financial price. For some parents, a pink slip is only one more missed day away. A recent study by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research confirms that 49 percent of workers, over 59 million people, lack basic paid sick leave for themselves.<sup>91</sup> Even fewer employees have leave that allows them to take time off to care for a sick child. Nearly 70 percent of workers lack sick leave plans that allow them leave to care for their family.<sup>92</sup> Many parents also work at jobs that do not provide paid vacation time – often a fallback parents use when children are sick or unable to attend school. Thirteen percent of non-poor workers with caregiving responsibilities lack paid vacation leave, while 28 percent of poor caregivers lack any paid vacation time.<sup>93</sup>

Parental leave is also a missing support for many families. Though paid leave is available in 163 other countries, the vast majority of American families lack access to paid leave to care for a newborn or newly adopted child.<sup>94</sup> Companies decide whether or not to provide paid leave. Yet research has shown that as few as 5 percent of parents have access to a job that provides paid parental leave.<sup>95</sup> Instead, certain employees are guaranteed under the Family and Medical Leave Act the right to 12 weeks of unpaid leave for these family responsibilities. Yet even this support is not available to all workers. The law does not apply to employees who work in companies with fewer than 50 people, employees who have worked for less than a year at their place of employment, and employees who work fewer than 1,250 hours a year. As a result, only 45 percent of parents working in the private sector are eligible to take this unpaid time off.<sup>96</sup>

As with flexibility in scheduling, low-wage workers are the least likely to find jobs with these various types of paid leave policies. The Urban Institute confirms that workers who need access to paid leave the most – those parents with young children and working welfare recipients – are the least likely to have these benefits.<sup>97</sup> Because these more rigid, low-wage positions provide so little of the flexibility and control parents need, low-income families often experience even greater work-family conflict and greater parental stress. Consequently, children in these families are more likely to feel the negative effects of their parents’ work on their lives.

Finally, working parents without flexibility and supports also struggle with the fact that the rest of the world seems all too rigid. The irony of a 24/7 economy is that many of the services and systems parents must access to care for their children and families do not acknowledge that most parents are working outside of the home. Doctors’ offices keep hours between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. Most often schools are open between 8 a.m. and 3 p.m. And child care centers often start charging parents by the minute when they arrive after a 6:00 p.m. closing time. Countless government programs, from child care assistance programs to social security offices that offer

programs to help parents and children, often require face-to-face appointments during business hours. It is no wonder that parents are stressed. Add the pressures of single parenthood, or a child with a chronic health problem or special needs, and the challenges parents face today seem insurmountable.

## **POLICY OPTIONS**

It is clear from this discussion that our new 21<sup>st</sup> century economy creates both opportunities and challenges for families and children. Mothers and fathers are now in the workforce to stay. These families are clearly working harder than ever to make ends meet. New ways of working, including a growing number of employees working evenings, nights, and weekends, are increasingly a part of the way we all earn a living.

While many of these changes are bringing benefits to our economy and to families, these working conditions are also creating conflicts between work and family. And consequently, these conflicts generate significant impacts on children and families. When parents lack flexibility and control over their schedules, their well-being suffers. Marriages can also pay a price when parents have to work odd hours. Parenting styles and behaviors are significantly affected by poor work environments, through less sensitivity and attachment to their young children and more negative interactions. And children's learning and potential for future success is limited when parents' work schedules conflict with time they could be spending with their children, or when there are only low quality caregiving options that parents can choose for children.

To date, we have not seen the societal shifts that would help families adjust to these changes. Only a few parents are able to find positions with flexible schedules and paid leave benefits, since employers are not legally compelled to address these needs. High quality, affordable child care is not universally available. Parents struggle to make the best decision among limited choices. Other educational and social support systems, such as schools and health professionals, continue to operate on the assumption that there is a full-time, at-home parent available to care for a child.

All of the burden to adjust, adapt, and conform has fallen on the backs of working parents. Unfortunately it is the children who pay the biggest price. If in fact policymakers want to address the needs of families as well as improve the well-being of children, then a package of policy solutions is critically needed.

- *Ensure that parents have access to a variety of forms of paid leave so they can better address the needs of their family.* It is clear that while there is a role for businesses in supporting working families, they cannot do it all alone. We need a clear set of policies that updates our social safety net for families and puts into place the supports families need. Government should step in to fund efforts such as paid parental leave and a minimum number of paid days off to help families address major life events, like having a new child, as well as the day-to-day needs of the family, such as visiting a doctor or caring for a sick child.
- *Encourage businesses (through both incentives and penalties) to provide more flexible work arrangements that give parents more choices in the way they work.* Our economy needs both mothers and fathers in the workforce. But we need 21<sup>st</sup> century solutions to the new challenges they face as working parents. Government can help support the creation of more flexible full-time jobs, and give workers increased control over when and where they work and more autonomy in meeting their dual responsibilities. Businesses that require work during nonstandard hours should have extra supports through government tax credits and

subsidies to address the particular challenges faced by these working families. Government can also highlight best practices and give recognition to companies that have successfully integrated business objectives with working families' needs.

Parents also need policies to help address the long hours families are putting into work. Through reforms to the Fair Labor Standards Act and policies that help workers' gain the flexibility they need, government can ensure that all workers have basic protections when trying to keep their job and care for their family. Finally, government can begin to address the inequalities between part-time workers and full-time workers by addressing pay and benefit parity. Through financial incentives as well as tax penalties, government can spark the creation of better part-time jobs, which provide the flexibility that some parents want without the loss of benefits, promotion potential, long-term financial stability, or wages.

- *Provide for expanded access to high quality child care choices for parents.* Broad access to high quality care is a critical component to ensuring that children are receiving the best social, emotional, and educational supports while their parents work. We need reforms that support quality care for infants and preschoolers, as well as expanded after-school options that are designed to meet the needs of both children and parents. Policies should also address parents' needs for care during nonstandard work hours.

We have gone too long with a system that relies too heavily on what parents can afford to pay, rather than focusing on the costs of providing developmentally beneficial care for children. Parents need help in paying for child care as they work and programs need financial supports to ensure quality care. Specifically, policymakers should consider a range of subsidies for low- and middle-income families as well as tax incentives that go directly to parents to help them manage the financial costs of providing care for their children. In addition, programs should receive direct funding tied to standards and criteria that will enhance the quality of child care programs.

- *Address the particular challenges faced by low-wage working parents.* Parents in low-wage jobs carry a sizable burden when it comes to navigating work and family responsibilities. These jobs can be particularly demanding, often requiring work at nonstandard hours, but yet, low-wage workers have the least access to work/family supports, and the fewest financial resources to draw upon. This means that the children in these families are the most vulnerable. A next generation of welfare policies needs to examine work requirements and income supplements that help make work pay for low-income families. Policymakers should also continue to expand the earned income tax credit and the child tax credit, increasing the benefits low-income families receive.
- *Address the needs of working parents by starting in government's own backyard.* Policymakers at the federal, state, and local level should explore ways to restructure the hours and length of the school year to better meet the needs of parents, while also addressing the educational needs of children. State and local policymakers, for example, could begin by ensuring universal access to full-day kindergarten programs.

Additionally, public agencies, from child care services to health clinics, should examine the way they deliver services to families, acknowledging the realities of working parents. Federal policies can provide both directives to examine and alter the way in which government works, as well as incentives to state and local agencies that improve services to working families. These efforts will hopefully expand efforts to ensure that parents get the supports they need to address both their role as a parent as well as their role as an employee.

Why a package of policies? It is clear that any one solution on its own will not necessarily enhance the lives of working families. The needs of parents and children are too varied for any one silver bullet. The key is to provide parents with more choices when it comes to navigating work and family. Families may prefer to use more flexibility at work to be home in the afternoons with their school-age children or may prefer to have their children go to an affordable, safe after-school program that enriches their education and sparks creativity. Both are needed solutions that will give parents expanded choices that do not create the trade-offs they now face.

Together, all of these supports for working families would begin to address both the needs of parents as they work and the needs of children as they grow and develop. In an inflexible economy, these supports are crucial to the well-being of children. They acknowledge that children come in families and that parents are indeed struggling to provide the best they can. These efforts would provide an expanded set of choices for parents so that the many trade-offs outlined in this paper between parenting and working begin to diminish. Children in America are paying a steep price for the way we work. It is time that public policy catches up with the realities of today's way of working. Parents and children cannot afford to wait any longer.

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