WORKING MOTHERS VS STAY AT HOME MOTHERS:
THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Ever since women began entering the work force the debate has been looming over mothers who enter the work force and those who choose to remain at home with their children. Such concerns are whether or not having a working mother negatively affects their children emotionally and/or academically. Another concern is the stress level a working mother faces daily. The researcher utilized and distributed a survey to working and nonworking mothers.
Dedicated to my son
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VITA

September 17, 1975.........................Born- Cambridge, Ohio

1999.........................................B.A. Education Marietta College
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Today’s women are once again finding themselves and their decisions placed under the microscope. Women find their decisions to enter the work force with their male counterparts criticized, because some felt women could not measure up when it came to performance and dedication. While that debate has dwindled somewhat a new debate has emerged. Women are now being scrutinized by such groups as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Carvel, 2001) and the American Academy of Pediatrics (2004), if they decide to enter the work force and have children.

“In the United States today, more than half of mothers with young children work, compared to 30 percent in the 1970’s” (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1999). Women find themselves entering the work force before they have children and then choosing to stay after they have children. Others find that their families require two incomes or in some cases their income may be the sole source.

Some research seems to incline that the working mother is having detrimental effects on the child, however new research is showing no such result. While working mothers may be exhibiting excess stress on their decision to work outside the home any ill emotional and academic effects on their children seem to be nonexistent. In some
situations it seems that children of working mothers actually benefit compared to those of nonworking mothers.
The topic this researcher chose was Working vs. Stay at Home Mothers: The Impact on Children.

Statement of Problem

According to this researcher not much has been done in the area of the impact of a working mother on her child’s emotions and academics. Therefore, an attempt was made to find out how working mothers affect their child emotionally and academically.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to discover if working mothers impact their children emotionally and academically any differently than that of a nonworking mother.

Research Questions

1. Does a working mother impact her child’s emotions and/or academics negatively?
2. Does a working mother impact her child’s emotions and/or academics positively?
3. Does a stay at home mother impact her child’s emotions and/or academics negatively?
4. Does a stay at home mother impact her child’s emotions and/or academics positively?

Central Phenomenon

What is it like to be a working mother?
Definition of Terms

Working Mother: any women who has children and works outside the home.

Nonworking Mother: any women who has children, but is not in the work force.

Separation Anxiety: negative symptoms often shown by children when being separated from their caregivers for any amount of time.
Limitations of Study

The limitations to the study were that the surveys were only completed by mothers living in the Mid-Ohio Valley. Another limitation was the participants in the study. Only mothers currently known by the researcher were chosen. Purposeful sampling was used.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

With more mothers entering the work force what are the impacts on their children? Growing from 30% of mothers in the 1970’s to over 50% presently the debate continues to present questions as to what is best for the child (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1999). Researchers argue about everything from emotional to academic impacts on children of working mothers. Many researchers have also begun studies on how stress of working mothers impacts their children.

Negative Impacts of Working Mothers

A study conducted by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that when mothers work full time during their child’s pre-school years the child is less effective at A-level work (Cavel, 2001). Children of full time working mothers achieved at A-level 52% of the time (Cavel, 2001). These children also found themselves unemployed 9% more of the time as well as suffering from psychological stress 28% more of the time compared to that of children with nonworking mothers (Cavel, 2001).

Another study conducted by the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth found that the more hours a mother works the “lower the child’s language development and academic achievement…” (Associated Press, 1999). While the language difference among these children diminished as the child got older it never completely disappeared (Associated Press, 1999).
Positive Impacts of a Working Mother

Current research also looks at positive outcomes of working mothers. Some studies show that while the lack of a mother’s presence can impact a child negatively, this impact is not as severe as what occurs if the mother does not work. Such factors include poverty, parental education, and quality childcare (Booth, 2000). In some cases without the income of the mother, the family may find themselves living at poverty level. With a dual income household, many women find themselves more able to make more choices for their families when it comes to nutrition and education (Essortment, 2002). According to a study in 1998, the improvement in living standards by working mothers offset any negatives (Carvel, 2001).

Parental education was also a positive aspect of a child’s success. It has been shown that children of a nonworking parent “fail to see the point of getting an education” (Figes, 2001) Other studies found that children of “two working parents get higher grades in high school”, but at the same time feel less pressure about doing so (Essortment, 2002). They also found that these children score higher on intelligence tests (Gershaw, 1988).

Positive results were also found with children who had to go to childcare. When the child was placed in a quality childcare situation there were positive effects on the child’s social and cognitive development (Figes, 2001) The study found that a trained nursery worker was able to stimulate the child with a wide variety of educational toys and games compared to that of a stay at home mother (Figes, 2001).
Repeated studies have also found that children of working mothers do not suffer any differently from anxiety, antisocial behavior, or stress-related problems than those of nonworking mothers. They did, however, find that children of working mothers held fewer stereotyped gender-role attitudes and felt their mothers were more competent. Also, daughters of working mothers were found to set higher goals for themselves (Gershaw, 1988). Children of working mothers were also seen as feeling that they had control over their environment (Gershaw, 1988).

**Negative Impacts of Nonworking Mothers**

While a working mother has a wide range of social and professional contacts, the nonworking mother is at times isolated to their immediate surroundings. There is little adult interaction and the monotony of daily interactions can be disheartening. “These women experience of a breaking down of their supportive family and/or social network” (Gershaw, 1988). This lack of adult support can lead into depression and the feeling of being overwhelmed by what lies before them. While the nonworking mother is staying at home to better her child academically and emotionally, the amount of actual quality time is not always as sufficient as that of a working mother. The time spent at home is usually full of completing household chores that do not include time with the child.

**Positive Impacts of Nonworking Mothers**

According to the Periodic Survey of Fellows: American Academy of Pediatrics Division of Child Health Research, the majority of pediatricians surveyed found that mothers should not work outside the home from their child’s infancy to early pre-school age (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1985).
The connection of children with their mothers at a young age will allow a close bond. This will make the communication between parent and child easier especially during the middle school and high years. The attention and moral values the child receives will help guide the child in a positive direction as they get older (Essortment, 2002).

*Working Mother Stress*

Working mothers not only bare the burden of leaving the children to work, but also the stresses of what in many cases equals two full time jobs. The mother has her job that she must leave her family for and then she has her job of taking care of the family she had to leave during the day. At times it seems like she is always playing catch-up and never quite finishes. While fathers are beginning to take on more responsibility in the home, “working mothers still perform most of the household chores” (2001, September).

Some houses may say chores are egalitarian, shared equally, however this is not seen in surveys conducted by The Wall Street Journal. In executives polled 52% of women were found to complete laundry duties compared to 7% of the men. Likewise 47% of women planned and shopped for meals compared to 8% of men. Similar findings were found in chores such as shopping for children’s clothing and staying home with children who came down sick (Gershaw, 1988).

Other stresses that working mothers are running into include when one of the children are sick. The responsibility of caring for the sick child still falls predominantly on the mother. The mother feels guilty about missing work or they feel guilt for having to leave the child with someone else when they are sick (2001, September).
Finally, working mothers are also feeling stressed about their sex lives. They feel guilt for being too stressed or fatigued for intercourse. The working mother may also hold resentment toward her spouse for not sharing in the housework duties more equally (2001, September).
Chapter 3

Method

This study was a qualitative study using open-ended questions. The surveys were given to mothers who work outside of the home, as well as mothers who are considered stay at home moms. Through the use of these surveys, themes were developed and validated to show how working mothers impact their children academically and emotionally versus mothers who do not work outside the home.

Participants

The researcher used a purposeful sample. Working and non-working mothers who currently reside in the Mid-Ohio Valley were used. Each participant currently has at least one child. These participants either currently work outside the home or are considered stay at home moms.

Procedure

First, a qualitative questionnaire (page 18) was created using open-ended questions. The questionnaire was then distributed directly to the participants in the study. Once complete, the questionnaires were returned directly to the researcher. After each questionnaire was returned, the data was examined to define possible themes.

Limitations of the Study

Possible limitations of the study included the sample of population. The population only included mothers the researcher currently knows. The participants
were not chosen randomly. Another limitation was that the participants all reside in a similar area.
Chapter 4

Results

The results of the study indicate that having a working or stay at home mother does not determine a child’s academic ability. Across the board, working and stay at home mothers claimed their child/children currently perform at or above grade level. Both working and stay at home mothers also feel that their child’s emotional state was stable.

The similarities between working and stay at home mothers end there. When asked how these mother’s children react to new situations working mothers overwhelmingly stated that their children reacted appropriately to new situations whether they were present or not. One mother stated her children are “comfortable and confident” when presented with new situations.

Stay at home mothers on the other hand don’t see the same confidence projected by their children. When stay at home mothers are out with their children and confronted with new situations the children “tend to cling” to their mothers and “hang back”. When the child is left on their own they have a tendency to cry and/or show shy behavior. All of the classic symptoms of separation anxiety were noted by stay at home mothers.

The final survey question addressed the everyday stress level of working mothers and stay at home mothers. The average stay at home mother implied that stress was not a major concern from day to day. Most felt that their stress level was moderate and had
little impact on their daily lives. The main symptoms caused by stress were the mother feeling grouchy and yelling at those around her. Many stay at home mothers found that they took their stress out on their children.

While stay at home mothers felt their stress level was at a moderate level, working mothers stated their stress level was “off the charts”. Working mothers found extremely difficult to juggle their jobs and their home life. They often felt overwhelmed and impatient with those around them, especially their children.

Themes

1. **Children of working mothers react with ease to new situations** as shown in the following qualitative statements:
   
   “They are comfortable and confident.”
   
   “They accept new situations fine if I’m present or not.”
   
   “My children react appropriately.”
   
   “Handles whatever comes his way.”

2. **Children of stay at home mothers have some difficulty with new situations:**
   
   “When I am present the youngest two will hang back a little.”
   
   “Tend to suffer from separation anxiety.”
   
   “Seem nervous and scared when I’m not present.”
   
   “My children are attached to me.”
   
   “They cling when I’m present and cry when I am not.”

3. **Children from both groups are emotionally stable:**
   
   “Stable! Happy.”
“Each child responds different, but they all cope.”

“Well rounded.”

“Well adjusted emotionally and not ‘scarred’ in any way.”

“My children are emotionally stable.”

4. **Academics are right on track:**

“Academically, they are doing well.”

“My children are average to above average.”

“All three perform at grade level.”

“On target academically.”

“High achiever and self motivated.”

5. **Stay at home mothers have moderate stress:**

“Pretty normal stress- elevated some days.”

“My stress level is moderate.”

“Stress changes day to day.”

6. **Stress impacts working mothers:**

“My stress level is off the charts.”

“My stress level is extremely high.”

“It impacts my life.”

“I often feel overwhelmed.”
Conclusion

In conclusion, the participants in this study see their children achieving at grade level and find them to be emotionally stable. Working mothers see their children with a sense of confidence and with the abilities to take on new experiences without much hesitation. Children of stay at home mothers have to deal more with symptoms of separation anxiety. While both groups of mothers have fluctuating stress levels the stay at home mother seems to keep a moderate level. However, the working mother finds high levels of stress frequently affect her daily life.
Chapter 5

Discussion

Prior studies have been conducted comparing the impact of working mothers and stay at home mothers on their children. The studies debated which was best for children both academically and emotionally. At this point there is still no evidence that one parenting style is better than another.

The purpose of this study was to discover if working mothers impact their children emotionally and academically any differently than that of a nonworking mother. The researcher sought responses to this question through qualitative surveys completed by working and nonworking mothers.

Unlike some research, this study saw no evidence that children of nonworking mothers performed inferior to those children of working mothers. Children from both groups were seen as performing at or above grade level by their mothers.

While some research has found that working and nonworking mothers have children with separation anxiety equally, this study did not find they were equal. Of the working mothers who participated none of them stated their children showed separation anxiety on a regular basis. However, all of the nonworking mothers surveyed viewed their children as having some anxiety with each new situation, especially while the children were not yet in grade school.
Just as some prior research has shown, this study also supports that stress has an impact on working mother’s daily life. Of the working mothers surveyed, all stated stress had a great impact on their day to day life. They often felt overwhelmed and unable to keep up with their job and family responsibilities. Like in past research the working mother felt she had two full time jobs.

*Future Implications*

In the future this researcher would expand my sample area in hopes of getting a more well-rounded response of how mothers see their working status affects their children. The current survey responses did not express different views within the two types of mothers. Therefore, this researcher was unable to provide any research on how a working mother may impact her child’s emotions in a negative way.
Working Mothers vs. Stay At Home Mothers:
The Impact on Children

1. Do you work outside the home or are you a stay at home mother?

2. How do you feel your child reacts to new situations when you are present? When you are not going to be present?

3. How would you describe your child emotionally?

4. How would you describe your child academically?

5. How would you describe your stress level and how does it impact your daily life?
References


