

Mothers And Work – Raising Hell

The great irony of mothers who achieve professional success is that they do so at some cost to their children, writes Bettina Arndt.

This article appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald, 3 June 2000.

It was every academic's worst nightmare. The University of North London sociology professor must have known the results of her study on maternal employment would prove controversial. But Margaret O'Brien can hardly have expected the venom she received when her research became the focus of a BBC Panorama program entitled "Missing Mums", which claimed British mothers were jeopardising their children's future by working long hours.

For weeks irate female journalists went on the attack, picking holes in her research, questioning her conclusions. "This program is deeply politically incorrect in an era when most mothers work," wrote Polly Toynbee in *The Independent*, describing O'Brien's results as flawed and frightening. "It will make many families anxious and cause them to make the wrong choices," she concluded.

What were the findings that made O'Brien a social outcast? Well, her research tracked the academic performance of 14- to 16-year-olds in a working-class London community and found twice as many children whose mothers worked full-time left school having failed their final examinations than children whose mothers worked part-time.

For all the flak directed at O'Brien, her results are not unique. There's a host of other studies showing better school results when mothers work shorter hours. The 1986 US Department of Education study by Milne, Myers, Rosenthal and Ginsburg involving a random sample of 15,579 primary students, plus a further 2,720 in high school, showed that for white children maternal employment was linked to lower maths and reading scores, and the more the mother worked the stronger the effect.

The 1984 British National Child Development Study found children whose mother had worked full-time had poorer reading and maths scores at age seven than children with homemaker or part-time working mums. Research by Adele and Allen Gottfried and colleagues (1988) from California State University showed that when the number of hours worked by mothers of five-, six- and seven-year-olds rose beyond 30 or so a week, the children achieved lower scores on intelligence tests, lower ratings for reading and less educational stimulation at home. Two Ohio State sociologists, Toby Parcel and Elizabeth Managhan (1994), found negative effects on children's vocabulary and maths scores when both parents worked more than 40 hours a week.

Last month, an Australian research report on child care hit the news, promoting headlines about the risks of informal care for children. But hidden within the Federal Government report, produced by researchers from Charles Sturt and Macquarie universities, was the startling finding that children in full-time child care in the first two years of their lives were rated by their early primary school teachers as being less effective learners than their peers.

Kay Margetts is completing a PhD on child care at Melbourne University. Her preliminary results are similar. They show five-year-olds who spend five days a week in non-parental care are rated as academically less competent than children who have been in child care four days or less. The child care impact is greatest during the first three years of the child's life, with boys showing stronger effects.

Surprised? Perhaps that's because such research findings rarely get a hearing due to gate-keeping by the media and the research community – as demonstrated not only in the O'Brien case but also in the heated debate over infant child care sparked by cartoonist Michael Leunig. Research that makes news is usually that that reassures working mothers.

"There were no consistent effects of the mother's employment on any aspect of child development," trumpeted a 1990 US Equal Opportunities Commission report, attracting headlines around the country. Note the careful use of the word "consistent". While it is true the growing body of research does not reveal the same result for all children whose mothers work, this is far from the end of the story.

Definite patterns have emerged, some of which are positive. For instance, there's evidence that girls can benefit from maternal employment. Having working mums tends to give girls a boost to self-esteem which pushes them on to greater educational attainment, said much of the earlier research. More recently the issue has turned out to be more complex with the positive effect applying mainly to mothers who are happy to be working. When mothers are stressed or unhappy about their dual roles the children are less likely to do so well, just as children with mothers unhappy at home may fail to achieve their potential.

And then there's the oft-quoted finding that children of employed mothers often have better academic results than children with homemaker mothers. This result has emerged in a range of international studies, including Margaret O'Brien's work, but analysis by researchers suggests this result is due to other differences between the families, such as socio-economic status. So in poor black families headed by single women, improved school results when mothers work are mainly attributed to healthier family finances.

There have also been studies that failed to show any significant effect of maternal employment on children's academic achievement including: the 1999 Christchurch health and development study; Armistead, Wierson and Forehand, 1990; Blau and Grossberg, 1992; Gottfried, 1991; and Vandell and Ramanan, 1992. But looking at the total body of research, there is one issue that emerges as a clear red flag – long maternal working hours.

"It's fair to suspect that long work hours – more than 40 hours a week – may be incompatible with parenthood," concludes Susan Dynerman in her review of the child-care literature, *Are Our Kids All Right* (Peterson's, 1994). It is interesting to note here that most of the research examines maternal working hours rather than looking at the work habits of both parents. It is difficult to measure the impact of varying work hours in fathers when so few men work other than full-time, yet there is still much variation in work patterns of mothers, with many limiting working hours in the belief this is best for their children. So this is the issue that attracts attention from researchers.

What isn't yet clear is whether the detrimental effects on children's academic performance occur only when mothers work long hours from when their children are very young, or whether it's also a problem to work less when children are little and only later get into the long hours – a common pattern in Australia.

It's difficult to compare the situation in Australia with the overseas research based primarily in the United States because the employment history of Australian women is quite different from their American sisters. In the US an amazing 87 per cent of mothers with children under 12 work more than 40 hours a week, according to 1991 figures from the New York Families and Work Institute. Australian data from the ANU's *Negotiating the Life Course* survey shows only 17 per cent of mothers with children under 12 are working such long hours.

However, this still means plenty of Australian children are affected by this issue – here almost 250,000 children live in two-parent families where a mother works more than 40 hours a week. And it's the well-educated mothers who are pushing the trend towards long maternal working hours with an increasing number now working full-time from when children are young. The bulk of Australian children whose mothers work long hours are older, including many teenagers who care for themselves when their parents aren't home.

Most Australian studies have not revealed any link between maternal working hours and outcomes for children, because of the small numbers of women working long hours. However, a study to be published this month in the Australian Social Monitor is large enough to overcome the problem. Melbourne University sociologists Mariah Evans and Jonathan Kelley conducted a study based on a national sample of 24,350 people and came up with an intriguing result. They found a link between mothers' work and poorer school results but only with well-educated mothers. The effect is strongest with university-educated women.

Evans and Kelley compared children of university-educated home-maker mothers with children whose equally well-educated mothers had worked full-time for at least some of the children's school or preschool years. They found one in four of the children with the working mothers ended up with a year's less education than children of equally well-educated mothers who stayed home.

"This means extensive maternal employment increases the risk that a child will leave the educational system a year earlier than they otherwise would have done," says Evans. "We're talking here about children failing to achieve what is expected of children of educated, affluent parents. Instead of achieving an honours degree, there's a one in four chance they will end up with an ordinary degree; there's a one in eight chance a child who would have completed secondary school drops out by Year 10, missing two years of education."

So why should a mother's work have the potential to derail her child's achievement in this top-end group? Could it be that the demanding nature of the work of well-educated women makes it more difficult for them to interact with their children in ways that promote educational success? That could be part of the story, says Evans, but she also comments that these are the children who have the most to lose academically when their mothers aren't present. "It could be related to the calibre of child care you are getting. You are trading one of the most highly educated people in Australia for someone likely to have a fairly ordinary education when you trade that mother care for what is ordinarily available in child care or after-school care."

That could be part of the story, says Evans, but she also comments that these are the children who have the most to lose academically when their mothers aren't present. "It could be related to the calibre of child care you are getting. You are trading one of the most highly educated people in Australia for someone likely to have a fairly ordinary education when you trade that mother care for what is ordinarily available in child care or after-school care."

Lucinda Aboud is a Sydney lawyer who gave up work because she was unable to solve the problems of finding substitute care for her three children, aged 14, 12 and 6. "Who else was going to be there, waving a stick over his head saying, 'You have to go and do your homework?'" she says.

Describing her dilemma in a recent Law Society Journal, Aboud talked of being worn down by the complaints of her younger daughter about being picked up by the babysitter. Worse was her suspicion her 14-year-old son Angus's school results were suffering due to the lack of parental supervision.

“It’s very hard for a babysitter to say to a 14-year-old, ‘No, you can’t go out or you’ve got to ring your mother first’,” says Aboud, describing her son’s afternoon trips to the local caff, the constant stream of friends dropping in. “The question ‘What time will you be home?’ from a child of this age is definitely not an expression of a desire to see you again. It is more likely a calculation of how quickly they can get their friends out of the house and hide the ashtrays and Subzero bottles.”

Like most children of his age Angus was happy to be home alone, a solution favoured by many parents. Last year’s Family Responsibilities Study by the Law Society of NSW found 60 per cent of the lawyers interviewed said their teenagers cared for themselves after school and during holidays. But for the Aboud children, whether home alone or with babysitters, the school work was suffering. “Angus wasn’t doing anything when I wasn’t there. I’d come home at 6.30 to 7 and by the time I got the younger children to bed, then I’d notice, ‘Why haven’t you done your homework?’”

After six months of his mother being home, Angus was getting more into a routine, even doing some work when he arrived home in the afternoon. “It made a big difference because he wasn’t up at midnight trying to get things done,” says his mother, adding that his last exam results were a big improvement. The Abouds are moving soon to England and Angus has just started boarding to smooth the transition between the different school years.

Mariah Evans believes well-educated mothers such as Lucinda Aboud are uniquely placed to provide the encouragement needed for children’s academic progress, particularly during tempestuous adolescent years. “Child care often doesn’t help children work out conflicts in their lives between spending time with friends or time on homework. It doesn’t help them think through their goals and balance the fact they want to learn to play the drums with finishing an assignment. Those are the kinds of things upper-middle-class women are usually very good at sorting out. When they are not there, some children may not be good at figuring them out for themselves.”

And the children most likely to have trouble figuring are boys. Richard Fletcher is manager of the Newcastle Men and Boys program which focuses on boys in schools and fathering issues. In the seminars for teachers and parents run by the program there’s constant talk of the difficulties faced by parents in keeping boys on track: “It’s difficult to get boys to put the same effort into their work as girls. They need more encouragement and monitoring, they are less organised. The more structure you put around boys to support their learning, the better they do.”

There’s a growing body of research suggesting boys are more vulnerable. Most recently, Paul Amato and Alan Booth’s 15-year American longitudinal family study, published in the 1997 book *A Generation at Risk* (Harvard University Press), found “maternal employment was not, in general, problematic for children”. But there was an exception, namely “when mothers regularly work very long hours, sons may be disadvantaged, particularly when their mothers are highly educated”, concluded the researchers.

Amato and Booth found that sons of women who work overtime (more than 45 hours a week) attain on average a full year less of education and earn nearly \$9,000 a year less as young adults than sons of women who work less or not at all. And the effect is stronger when the mothers are highly educated. “Overall, sons have the highest level of attainment when their mothers are employed part-time, and the lowest level of attainment when their mothers are employed overtime,” concluded the authors.

American researchers Sonalde Desai, Lindsay Chase-Lansdale and Robert Michael (1989) found adverse effects on vocabulary tests of 500 four-year-olds whose mothers had worked during the first

year of the child's life, but only for boys from higher-income families. A series of Canadian studies by Gold and Andres (1978) found 10-year-old sons of middle-class employed mothers obtaining lower scores on maths and language tests than daughters of employed women and children of non-employed women. Similar effects were found by US researchers Zaslow, Rabinovich and Suwalsky (1991).

An American study by Bogenschneider and Steinberg in 1994 teased out the impact of various patterns of maternal employment. The authors found that with the most affluent (upper-middle-class) families, the son's high school performance was adversely affected both by the mother's current full-time employment but also if she had worked full-time during the boy's preschool years. Middle-class high school boys showed adverse effects only when mothers currently worked full-time. Girls from both groups of affluent families showed adverse effects only if their mothers worked full-time when they were in preschool.

So it seems boys from affluent, educated families are most at risk and their school performance may suffer even if mum postpones full-time work until the boy is in high school – which poses quite a challenge to the common Australian assumption that once children are older, mothers are free to devote their efforts to a full-time career.

Mat Sanders, professor of psychology at the University of Queensland, has long been concerned that teenagers are seen as less in need of care: "The assumption that older children are in lesser need of parental involvement and support is just simply wrong." Sanders has recently been involved in work on the role of parental monitoring in keeping teenagers out of trouble. Most of the research in this area has focused more on troubled, poorer families, but he mentions the term "affluent neglect" which has been used to describe the impact on children of having parents distracted by their own careers. "When parents get so involved professionally in their own careers, the normal things parents have done in the past to keep teenagers on track and focused tend to occur to a lesser extent."

Sanders is keen to point out this research simply suggests a greater risk of children doing less well. There are children who are self-sufficient and do just fine, even with little parental contact. And there are parents who are so supportive their care and sensitivity makes up for their absence. But Sanders suggests this is not the norm.

Most researchers attribute girls' greater resilience to role-modelling offered by their successful mothers. But George Patton, director of the Centre for Adolescent Health at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne, suggests there are female characteristics that make them better able to cope without maternal supervision. "One might suspect girls are able to offset limitations in relationships at home. They tend to make stronger social affiliations than boys. Girls tend to be better verbally, to be more socially interactive, and have a greater capacity for intimate relationships with friends," he says, suggesting the adolescent girl who is home alone will often have friends to chat to, to offer help and encouragement with school work. Males tend to be more isolated and more prone to distractions.

The growing awareness of the academic risk for older boys of being home alone is fuelling the boom in weekday boarding and long-day programs now being offered by some of Sydney's leading private schools. This is a solution for parents who can afford up to \$23,000 a year in boarding fees, but no help to those who have no choice about their working hours and limited finances.

Yet there are affluent parents who do have choices. George Patton believes there's a clear message for parents: "One might ask the question as to where the priorities for parents lie. For a mother

working part-time, in many instances the choice to work part-time will be a choice to maintain parental care as a priority. For some mothers working full-time, that may be less of a priority.”

Children are receiving the message. Last year a book called *Ask the Children* by Ellen Galinsky (William Morrow) reported their reactions to working parents. It endeavours to paint a glowing picture of children’s support for their working parents, but includes data suggesting children are well aware when they have a greater priority in their parent’s lives. Galinsky finds, for instance, that children who spend more time with their parents are more likely to say their parents made them feel important and loved. “The sheer regularity of parent-child interaction is linked to the way the child feels about his or her mother and father.”

Parents who spend less time with their children are rated more poorly on a range of factors, including knowing what is really going on in their lives; encouraging them to want to learn and enjoy learning; appreciating them for who they are and for being able to attend the important events in their lives.

In her 1997 book *The Time Bind* (Metropolitan), University of California sociology professor Arlie Hochschild investigated why an American corporation was encountering resistance to its family-friendly policies. Hochschild found most workers in the company were choosing to work long hours, despite having other options. Hochschild deduced many parents choose to work long hours to escape from the pressures of family life and criticised their decision to “steal time from their children” to advance their careers. “In the grip of a time bind, working parents redefine as non-essential a child’s need for security and companionship.”

Having made this decision, there’s more than a little irony that some children may fail to follow in their successful parents’ footsteps.