

Father Involvement and Young Children's Well-Being:
The Role of Nonstandard Parental Employment Schedules

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses how father engagement with children, responsibility for care, and confidence in parenting condition the negative impact on young children when one or both parents in dual-earner families work for pay during nonstandard hours. Past research has demonstrated that behavioral development is harmed more when mothers are employed on a non-day schedule than when fathers are. To try to understand this finding, we investigate two questions. First, how is father involvement with children affected when the mother works a nonstandard schedule, and how is it affected when the father does? Second, are variations in father involvement and confidence more predictive of child well-being when a parent works nonstandard hours? To answer these questions, we make use of a nationally representative sample of young children with co-resident parents from the first three waves of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey - Birth Cohort (ECLS-B).

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, the United States has evolved towards a “24/7 economy” (Presser 2003), in which a large fraction of the jobs available in the labor market require some schedule aside from a standard daytime shift, such as an evening shift, a night or “swing” shift, or a rotating schedule. While scholars have asked numerous questions about the social impact of the 24/7 economy, relatively little work has addressed the impact of parents’ work schedules on young children’s well-being. However, the conceptual rationale for examining how nonstandard schedules affect children is clear. Parent-child interactions are crucial for development during the early years; children who do not receive an adequate degree of attentive, warm, stimulating, responsive, and nonrestrictive parenting and caregiving face an increased risk of suboptimal cognitive and socioemotional development (see, e.g., Belsky 1984). If nonstandard hours limit the time parents can spend with young children or drain the energy and attention that parenting demands, development may be negatively impacted.

To the extent that existing research has empirically addressed this issue, it has confirmed that mothers’ nonstandard hours are associated with poor developmental outcomes among infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children (Han 2005, Joshi and Bogen 2007, but see Ross Phillips 2002). Morett, Rosenbaum, and Weinshenker (2008) went one step further, showing that young children’s cognitive development is negatively affected when either *mothers or fathers* are employed during nonstandard hours. They found that children’s behavioral development, however, was affected only when the mother works a nonstandard shift and the father works during the day, and not in the converse situation. Han (2008) reported a similar result when studying behavior problems among children of diverse ages.

We contend that these results highlight the value of conducting a detailed examination of father involvement in two-parent families in which parents work non-overlapping shifts. In a classic theoretical statement, Lamb and co-authors (1987) identified three dimensions of father involvement: direct engagement, availability to the child, and responsibility for the child’s well-being. There is a solid scholarly consensus that fathers’ developmentally appropriate involvement has considerable benefits (e.g. Amato 1998, Pleck and Masciadrelli 2004). At the same time, scholars have noted that while contemporary cultural scripts for fatherhood prescribe more involvement than in the past, the father is typically expected to be less engaged and responsible than the mother except in a few specific realms such as discipline, moral instruction, and physical play (Townsend 2002).

When the members of a couple work at different times, it is logical to imagine that fathers may increase their involvement, taking on a more equal role, or even that of the primary parent. There is evidence that the engagement dimension of father involvement tends to increase when fathers are home and their spouses are not (Brayfield 1995, Nock and Kingston 1988, Presser 2003), as occurs when parents work different shifts. However, prior work also indicates that mothers who work full-time during a different shift than their partners are more likely than those with part-time employment to use nonparental sources of child care (Brayfield, Glass 1998), implying that fathers in these situations may be excused from regular child care. Yet if the father works during the day and the mother is working at night, the father may have little choice but to be engaged, and to take considerable responsibility for child care. Third-party care is much harder to find in the evening or at night than during the day (aside, perhaps, from care by relatives).

If fathers are stepping into the breach while mothers are employed in two-parent families, and if father involvement, as noted above, is beneficial for children, why have past results indicated worse child outcomes when parents work different shifts? Presumably, not all men called upon to provide “solo” care while their partners work for pay are equally willing to do so. Considering that the dominant cultural script limits father involvement, some may lack confidence in their abilities as solo caregivers. Further, men who work during the day may be fatigued when they are called upon to care in the evening or at night. In short, there is good

reason to expect a wide range in developmentally appropriate engagement, acceptance of responsibility for care, and confidence in parenting ability among fathers of young children who are employed at different hours than their partners. Yet in this situation, these variations may be highly consequential for child development.

The purpose of this research is to investigate two hypotheses. The first is that the level of fathers' developmentally appropriate engagement with young children, the level of responsibility for children's care, and the level of confidence in parenting will be greater in dual-earner families where the parents work non-overlapping shifts than when both parents work during the day. Second, we hypothesize that the levels of fathers' engagement, responsibility, and confidence will be more closely associated with child well-being when parents work different shifts. We further expect these associations to be strongest when the mother works a non-day shift and the father works a conventional schedule.

DATA AND METHODS

Data Source

The analysis relies on restricted-use data from the first three waves of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey, Birth Cohort (ECLS-B), a nationally representative sample of all children born in the U.S. in 2001 (National Center for Education Statistics 2007). The first assessment of infants and surveys of their parent(s) occurred at 9 months, which was followed by additional round of assessments and surveys at 24 months and in the fall of the preschool year, or the year prior to most of the children's entry into kindergarten. The data are ideal for our study as they contain indicators of work schedules, extensive measurement of parenting behaviors for *both* parents, and measures of the child's health and developmental achievements. In addition, the measures of child well-being come from different sources than the measures of father involvement, thereby avoiding the problem of shared method variance (Amato 1998).

We limit the data set to those infants living in two-parent families where both parents were working for pay. (In longitudinal analyses, they must both have been working for pay at the time of the initial survey.) The biological mother must have been the main survey respondent, although the "father" in the family may be any man who was in a co-residential relationship with the mother.¹ Limiting our focus to biological mothers is necessitated by skip patterns omitting non-biological mothers from a number of questions. In addition, assessments must have occurred at all waves included in each analytic model. Because of small cell sizes, Native American and multiracial non-Hispanic mothers are omitted from the analysis.

Outcomes

The eventual goal of this research is to assess the impact of father solo care on both behavioral and cognitive development, comparing families with parents working non-overlapping shifts to other dual-earner families. We initially focus on predicting children's behavioral development for several reasons. As discussed above, the existing research has found that behavior is more negatively affected by mothers' nontraditional scheduling than by fathers' (Han 2008, Morett et al. 2008). Also, the ECLS-B collected multi-method, multi-source measures of behavioral development. At each round of data collection, observers rated children's behavioral development, although the method varied from wave to wave. At nine months, behavioral development was rated using the Nursing Child Assessment Teaching Scale (NCATS). The Toddler Attachment Sort (TAS-45) was used at 24 months, and the "Two Bags Task" was utilized during the 24-month and preschool assessment. In addition, parental respondents answered age-appropriate questions about children's behavioral problems during each survey.

¹ We plan to assess the sensitivity of our longitudinal models to the inclusion or exclusion of families in which the father figure in the household changes from one interview to the next.

Predictors

One of our key independent variables is parents' joint work schedule at the baseline, which is derived from mothers' reports of their and their spouse or partners' work schedules. In light of the theoretical focus of this research, as well as the small cell sizes for many specific schedule combinations, we combine parents' joint schedules into four categories: both parents work during the day, the father works a non-day (evening, night, or irregular) shift, the mother works a non-day shift, and both parents work non-day shifts. This focus on joint work schedules marks an advance relative to other studies that examine only mothers' schedules.

Fathers' engagement with children is measured using a series of survey questions asked directly of fathers. Some of the specific forms of engagement vary from survey to survey (e.g., changing a diaper at nine months, playing with construction toys during the preschool year). Factor analysis reveals that at each wave, many of the items cohere along two dimensions: routine care and play. These dimensions will serve as our two measures of engagement.

Several questions from the father survey pertain to fathers' responsibility for children. During each round of data collection, fathers were asked how much time they typically spend caring for the study child in the mother's absence. They were also asked about their influence over decisions about matters affecting the child. In addition, during the 9 and 24-month surveys, fathers were asked about their relative responsibility for time-consuming care tasks such as taking the child to the doctor or staying home when the child is ill.

Fathers' confidence in parenting was assessed during the 24-month and pre-school interviews with a single question asking men to rate themselves; response choices ranged from "not very good at being a father" to "a very good father". This question was not on the 9-month survey. In its place, we plan to use a scale of items that assessed the frequency with which men experienced positive feelings about their infants.

Although the measures described above are of primary interest, the ECLS-B data also allows us to control for a rich set of covariates that might potentially confound the relationships among parents' work schedules, father involvement, and child well-being. As we have done in prior research, we will control for mothers' age, race, marital status, primary language, family background, and socioeconomic status. We will also control for use of non-parental child care, parents' job characteristics, child gender, number of siblings, and birth complications.

Methods

The ECLS-B provides multi-source data on children's behavioral development and multiple measures of paternal engagement and responsibility. These multiple measures may be viewed as observed indicators of unobserved, latent constructs. Accordingly, we will utilize structural equation modeling (SEM) to predict the effects of fathers on children's behavior. SEM incorporates the amount of error in the measurement of the latent constructs in the estimation of the causal model, thereby allowing for the best possible coefficient estimates.

The analysis of the effects of nonstandard schedules on fathers' engagement, responsibility, and confidence may eventually be done in a structural equation framework as well. Initially, however, we will estimate simple change models, or models with prior levels of key variables controlled, using individual measures as the outcomes. This strategy will provide valid estimates of the effect of changes in parents work schedules on changes in fathers' parenting.

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