

Research You Can Use

Positive Work Environments Linked to Positive Parenting

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Costigan, C.L., Cox, M.J., & Cauce, A.M. (2003). *Work-Parenting Linkages Among Dual-Earner Couples at the Transition to Parenthood. Journal of Family Psychology, 17, 397-408.*

As the number of dual-earner families has grown, debate has ensued over how these changing demographics are changing parenting. Can working mothers and fathers develop meaningful relationships with their children? Does stress at the office affect the home environment? Are children losing out when their parents work? Though the answers to such questions are complex and inconclusive, research shows that stress accumulated at work can spillover to impact a parent's relationship with his or her children.

Over time, negative interpersonal relationships at work can diminish the quality of parenting for new families. This study followed 138 families in North Carolina and found that mothers who are dissatisfied with their relationships with their coworkers or who feel low morale at the workplace are likely to experience less sensitive, stimulating, and mutually enjoyable interactions with their children. For example, mothers who reported higher job stress were found to be less responsive to their infants' expressions and less likely to encourage their children's learning.

Fathers' relationships with their children, on the other hand, may not be as directly impacted by stressful work. However, this study looked at parent-child relationships at 9 and 12 months, and research indicates that the trend seems to reverse later in the family developmental stage, such that fathers' rather than mothers' parenting is more likely to be affected by work experiences. Interestingly, the current study also indicates that although fathers' parenting is not linked to their work experiences, it is linked to their spouses' work experiences. When mothers experience more positive coworker relationships and greater independence at work, fathers tend to have more positive interactions with their children.

The results of this research should raise red flags for parents, employers, and policy makers alike, given the large numbers of working parents. It is clear that it is not simply a matter of whether or not a parent is employed that affects his or her parenting abilities, but that it is the quality of the work experience that is crucial. As such, this research underscores the need to increase efforts to develop positive work environments, with the potential to affect all levels of the family.

Take-home message: Due to the potential effects of stress from work on relationships at home, it is important that employers create a positive work environment for the sake of not only their employees but also their employees' families.

Research You Can Use is a translation of selected research on topics related to the intersection of work, family, and children. The research articles were selected by students in the Psychology of Work, Family, and Children class (Psyc 116) in fall 2005. The information in the research articles were rewritten into plain language by student research assistants at the Berger Institute. The Berger Institute also has a brief listing of exemplary research that supports our conclusions about best practices for public policies, employers, communities, and working families. We invite you to log on for more information: <http://berger.cmc.edu>. *This was published in the Berger Institute newsletter, Spring 2006, vol. 6.*

About the Berger Institute for Work, Family, and Children

The Berger Institute for Work, Family, and Children is a non-profit research institute at Claremont McKenna College, a selective liberal arts college that is a member of the Claremont Colleges – a university consortium. The Berger Institute for Work, Family, and Children provides data-based research on the challenges facing individuals, working families, and employers to improve the quality of family life and enhance productivity and the bottom line.

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