

## The best outcome for children in their early years is to have two working parents

*The debate around the impacts that working parents have on their children's development is long running and continuing. Commentators have raised concerns about working mothers especially resulting in children who are less well-behaved, do worse at school and are less healthy. [Anne McMunn](#) outlines the results of her research looking at the working habits of parents and the behaviour of children during their first five years.*



Alongside balancing the demands of combining paid work with childrearing, working parents also have to deal with concerns, often reflected in the media, about the impact that time spent working may have on their children. Our research looks at the relationship between parental employment patterns over the first five years of a child's life in relation to behaviour at age five amongst nearly 10,000 children born between 2000 and 2002. We found no significant detrimental effects on a child's social or emotional development if their mothers work during their early years.

In fact, we see some suggestion that children whose mothers were in paid work throughout the early years are significantly less likely to have behavioural difficulties at age five than children whose mothers were never employed in that period. We also find significant gender differences in this relationship. For boys, the behavioural 'advantage' of having a working mother was explained by the fact that working mothers are, on average, more likely than stay-at-home mothers to have higher educational qualifications, live in a higher income household, and are less likely to be depressed. For girls the behavioural benefits of having a working mother were significantly stronger than for boys, so these factors did not explain behavioural differences for girls.

Some studies have suggested that whether or not mothers work in the first year of a child's life can be particularly important for later outcomes. However, in this study we did not see any evidence of a longer-term detrimental influence on child behaviour whose mothers were working when they were nine months old.

We also looked at child behaviour in relation to the working arrangements of both parents (in two-parent families) as we know that working couples increasingly work together to juggle the demands of paid work and family life. We found that the ideal scenario for both boys and girls was to live with two parents who are both in paid work. Beyond that, we again found significant gender differences in relationships between parental employment in the early years and child behaviour at age five. Whereas boys in households where the mother was the breadwinner displayed more difficulties at age five than boys living with two working parents, the same was not true for girls. Conversely, girls in traditional households where the father was the breadwinner were more likely to have difficulties at age five than girls living in dual-earner households

We need to do further work to understand why the daughters of working mothers are less likely to have behavioural difficulties at age five than daughters of stay-at-home mothers. We also want to examine relationships between parental working arrangements and teacher reports of child behaviour in case working mothers are systematically less likely than stay-at-home mothers to report behavioural difficulties in their children. However, our work does provide evidence that maternal employment in the early years is not detrimental to the socio-emotional development of children, and may be somewhat beneficial.

*This article is a shorter version of the paper, [McMunn, A and Kelly, Y and Cable, N and Bartley, M \(2011\) Maternal employment and child socio-emotional behaviour in the UK: longitudinal evidence from the UK Millennium Cohort Study. J Epidemiol Community Health](#)*