# A LINE ON LIFE

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# Working Mothers and Their Children *

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Mothers who go into the work force have been a topic of controversy for decades. Between 1973 and 1985, the percentage of working wives with children under 18 has jumped 20 points – from 42% to 62%. In 1985, half of the women with children younger than three years old worked. In this article, we will cover some of the effects of working on both the mothers and their children.

Almost everyone is aware that the roles of mother and wife often conflict with roles involving outside work. Even if you don't believe the stereotype that "*a woman's place is in the home*," women still have the conflict of being two places at once – with their children and at work. Added conflict occurs when the woman earns more than her husband does, especially if the husband believes that his traditional role of "*breadwinner*" is being threatened. With all these conflicts, these women feel more overload and being pulled in different directions with the role of mother than they do with their role in paid work.

Psychologists Hofferth and Moore (1979) found that – in terms of personal satisfaction – the reasons *why* she is working are more important than the fact that she is working. Several factors lead to greater satisfaction –

1. Choosing to work rather than being under pressure to work,

2. Having the support of their husbands,

3. Working part-time rather than full-time,

4. Starting to work when their children are in school rather than preferring to remain home with preschool children.

Although women are predominantly employed as teachers, secretaries and sales clerks, they have made significant gains in the professions. For example, about 40% of the bank officials and financial managers are women. In 1984, *The Wall Street Journal* and the Gallup Organization ran a joint survey of 772 women executives. All of them had reached the position of vice-president or higher in their firms. In this group, the married women executives were more satisfied with their lives than the unmarried ones. However, 57% of those earning less than their husbands were "*totally satisfied*" with their lives compared with only 38% of women executives who earned more than their husbands. It could be that the husbands who were "*out-earned*" feel insecure or threatened by their wives' success. Possibly this very high earners spend more energy "*bringing home the bacon*" than enjoying it with their husbands.

Lower on the pay scale, sociologist Myra Marx Ferree (1976) surveyed 137 predominantly working-class wives with children in first or second grade. Of her group, 45% were housewives, 29% held part-time jobs, and 26% had full-time work. There were no group differences in marital happiness. However, the working women were more satisfied with themselves and with their lives in general. Of these, part-time workers were the happiest. Apparently, part-time jobs offered the social and psychological benefits of employment, while also allowing them more time for family life.

In Ferree's study, the working wives did not hold glamorous occupations. Most of them filled stereotypical female positions – typist, waitress, cashier or office machine operator. However, even these jobs seemed to provide the benefits of a paycheck, a sense of accomplishment and increased social contacts.

As families have fled to the suburbs or followed the breadwinners' jobs to new locations, Ferree found this to be a major source of dissatisfaction on the part of full-time homemakers. These women experience a breaking down of their supportive family and/or social network. These women feel relatively alone in their new surroundings. There seems to be little adult companionship for the housewife during the day other than TV games shows or soap operas. These homemakers are likely to complain, "*I feel like I am going crazy by staying at home*," "*I feel like I am in jail*," or "*I don't see anything but four walls each day*."

Almost anyone who is uprooted and put in a new, unfamiliar environment will feel lonely and isolated for a while. How long this "*while*" is depends a great deal on *you*. Rather than waiting endlessly for neighbors or the local "Welcome Wagon" to contact you, it helps to be assertive enough to contact people or organizations in your new area that share your interests. In fact, inquiries about similar organizations in new locales can be made even *before* you move. This information can be obtained from those people close to you, w2ho you already know and trust.

For the working mother, her job expands her horizons no matter where she goes. Through her new job, she can expand her social contacts, which will increase her satisfaction with her life.

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## Maternal employment can have positive effects for both the parents and the children.

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However, the major reason women were expected to stay home is to "*be there*" for their children. What are the effects of maternal employment on the children?

Repeated studies by developmental psychologists (Gold & Andres, 1978; Easterbrooks & Goldberg, 1985; Hoffman, 1985) found no consistent evidence that maternal employment was harmful to children. This does not mean that working mothers have no problems with their children, but merely that the problems are not significantly different. As compared to the children of full-time homemakers, children of working mothers generally do not differ in terms of anxiety, incidence of antisocial behavior, dependence, or complaints of stress-related disorders – headaches, upset stomachs and so on. In fact, children of working mothers hold fewer stereotyped gender-role attitudes and view their mothers as more competent. In addition, daughters of working mothers are more achievement oriented – setting higher career goals for themselves – than daughters of nonworking mothers.

In some cases, fathers stay at home as "house-husbands" reversing the stereotypical roles, while mothers take the morning trek to the factory or office. In these families, children also show fewer stereotypical gender-role attitudes. Beside that, these children score higher in intelligence tests and have greater **internal locus of control**. ("*Internal locus*" indicates believing that you have control over your environment rather than believing that your environment controls you – which would be an "*external locus of control*.") However, these findings cannot necessarily be attributed to the father remaining home. The same attitudes that originally led the parents to reverse the roles may have also led to the different attitudes of the children.

Overall, working mothers spend half as much time caring for their infants as do full-time housewives. However, these infants develop the same normal attachments – "emotional bonding" – to the working mothers. As some of you may already know, it seems as if the **quality of the time** that parents and children spend together – along with making adequate child-care arrangements – outweighs the actual number of hours.

When mothers *choose* to work and find their work fulfilling, they are happier with their lives. They and their husbands tend to be more **egalitarian** – share equally – in the distribution of the chores in the home as well as the breadwinning role. It is likely that the working mothers' feelings of competence and high self-esteem make their relationships with their children much more productive.

Unfortunately, in many homes – even those with egalitarian attitudes – talk is cheaper than action. In *The Wall Street Journal*/Gallup survey previous discussed, they found that the married women executives were still much more likely to have the major responsibility for traditional household chores. For example, 52% of the women executives saw that the laundry got done as compared to 7% of their husbands. These women were more likely than their husbands to plan meals and shop for food (47% vs. 8%), shop for children's clothes (70% vs. 3%) and stay home with their children when they got sick (30% vs. 5%). (In case you didn't notice, the percentages do not add up to 100%. The remaining percentages for each activity indicate the proportion of families who equally shared these responsibilities.)

The mere fact that a woman works does not mean that this will be detrimental to her children. As the present evidence strongly indicates, having a working mother can be a positive experience for her children. Unfortunately, there are several qualifications to make the experience of having a working mother a positive one. The working-mother experience is likely to be positive *if* –

1. The mother *wants* to work rather than being forced to do so.

2. When parents are not there, adequate childcare is available.

3. There is adequate support from husbands and/or other family members.

Although family situations with working mothers can be good for the children – if one or more of the above needs are missing – the family experience can be a traumatic one for both children and parents. If you hear about something going wrong with children who have a working mother – before you blame it on her working – remind yourself about some of these other factors involved.

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* Adapted from Spencer Rathus, *Psychology*, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1987, pages 593-595.