



## RESEARCH SUMMARY

### **The Effects of Early Maternal Employment on Child Development in the UK by the CMPO Research Team, University of Bristol, 2003.**

This is another report that focuses on cognitive rather than emotional development of children. Even so, there is some evidence that full time work (though not part-time work) undertaken by the mother before her child is at least 18 months old can be slightly negative for the child's cognitive development.

The report finds that the effects of full-time maternal employment are not so great as might have been expected because fathers generally step in to compensate for the loss of maternal inputs to the child's care. This finding underlines the importance of parental inputs rather than those made by non-parental care—of whatever type or quality.

The only measure in the report which may in some way reflect the emotional state of the children relates to behavioural problems at the age of 4. Here the results are not so clear and unambiguous as for cognitive outcomes. The authors of the report have themselves cautioned that "...we have only one measure of behavioural outcomes, compared to the four measures of cognitive development, [therefore] our conclusions must be less robust[as also] the behavioural score is derived from mother-reported data it is difficult to know to what extent it accurately reflects the child's development rather than the mother's perceptions...".

We must note that while it is possible that the bias in a mother's perception may lead to a worse picture than the real one (as the report later suggests on p.55), it is equally likely that due to their affection, and often guilt at being away from the child for so long, working mothers are more indulgent in their reporting and an impartial observer may find the real picture worse than what is suggested here by the data.

The findings in the report may actually reflect the importance of the mother's contribution to the emotional state of the children because it finds no "significant effects" of maternal employment on children's behaviour based upon the "mother's educational attainment, child's gender or pre-birth financial status" but, it goes on to say, that "...fulltime maternal employment prior to 18 months was associated with significantly more behavioural problems for the children of single mothers than of couples" (p.54). These problems, however, are probably not caused by the lack of paternal care as, according to the report, unlike for cognitive outcomes, greater contribution to parenting by fathers does not have any impact either way on behavioural outcomes.

It seems to be the stress of combining full time work and childcare that has a detrimental effect on children's behaviour; to quote "[A]ccording to these results, both stress and tiredness are strongly positively related to behavioural problems in children....[and] the fact that the mother's report of stress and tiredness was recorded two years before the child's behavioural score provides support for the idea that there is a causal link [between full time maternal employment and behavioural problems in children]"(p.55).

The other significant factor seems to be the early use of non-parental care. The report says, "The results here are somewhat contradictory as [some data]... suggests that paid childcare

(non-relative and centre care) have relatively beneficial effects on behaviour, yet [other data shows] ...it is the children of mothers who use these types of care when they work full time that experience the greatest detrimental effects". They further find that it is a combination of different types of care that "...help to minimise the harmful effects of full time employment..." (p.56). It is important to note the terminology here - even a combination of different types of care can only "minimise" what are accepted as "the harmful effects" of early maternal employment. In the light of these findings it seems fair to say that the report has data on the correlation between full time maternal employment and children's behaviour which are open to different interpretations. It is also possible that a look at the raw data may yield very different results. What is clear, however, is that "statistically significant" or not early full time maternal employment seems to impact on children's behaviour in a detrimental way which non-parental care of any kind or quality is unable to offset.

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