Mothers at Work: Effects on Children’s Well-being

This important book examines the effects of the mother’s employment on family life and children’s well-being. It starts with a thorough review of previous research on this topic and then reports the results of a study designed to answer the key questions that emerge. The study focuses on 369 families with an elementary school child, living in an industrialized city in the Midwest. They include both one-parent and two-parent families, African Americans and Whites, and a broad range of economic circumstances. Extensive data have been obtained from mothers, fathers, children, teachers, classroom peers, and school records. The analysis reveals how the mother’s employment status affects the father’s role, the mother’s sense of well-being, and child-rearing patterns and how these, in turn, affect the child.

Mothers at Work provides an intimate picture of urban life and how families cope with mothers’ employment. It will be valuable reading for social workers, therapists, policy makers, and scholars in child development and women’s studies.

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Mothers at Work
Effects on Children’s Well-being

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with
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This book is dedicated with love to our children and grandchildren:

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Preface

Few would challenge the statement that one of the major social changes in the United States is the increased employment of mothers. For mothers with children under age eighteen, the United States has gone from less than 30 percent in the labor force in 1960 to less than 30 percent not in the labor force today. Yet, despite the fact that there have been numerous studies of the effects of mothers working over the years, we still know very little about how a mother’s employment status affects her family, her children, and her own well-being. The prevailing view that mothers’ employment is a social problem has been challenged in recent publications, but few empirical studies have really examined how being a mother with a paid job or one who is a full-time homemaker affects family life and children’s development. That is the focus of this book.

In this book, we first review the previous literature and then present a study designed to trace the impact of the mother’s employment status on three aspects of family life – the father’s role, the mother’s well-being, and the parents’ childrearing orientations – and how these, in turn, affect children. The study focuses on 369 families with a child in the third or fourth grades of the public schools in an industrialized city in the Midwest. They represent a broad socioeconomic range and include both one-parent and two-parent families, African Americans and Whites. Extensive data have been obtained from mothers, fathers, children, teachers, classroom peers, and school records. Throughout the book, attention is given to how socioeconomic conditions, the mother’s marital status, ethnicity, and the child’s gender affect these patterns.

This study was a group endeavor. Although the basic plan and design was set by the senior author, the research involved a considerable number of others, primarily graduate and undergraduate students at the University of Michigan.
Two former graduate students, Rebekah Levine Coley and Allison Sidle Fuligni, were partners in this project from the beginning. The original plan was to include only two-parent families because of the particular interest in the father’s role, but Dr. Coley was particularly interested in single-mother families, and it was her influence that led to their inclusion, thus enormously enriching the research. She modified the mother interview for single mothers, recruited other graduate students to take part in interviewing the children, and played a major role throughout the study. Allison Sidle Fuligni directed the field operation, supervised the coding, and was a major force in keeping the whole project moving and organized. The third core member of the team was Donna Dumm Kovacs, who brought her expertise to the data processing. All three traveled daily to the study site to collect classroom data and interview the children individually. Each had her own area of interest and completed her doctoral dissertation with data from the project, but it seemed appropriate that they should also be part of this book, which reports the major results of our investigation. Thus, each took part in writing specific chapters, and their contributions are noted there.

Lise Youngblade joined the project at a later point. She took charge of the statistical analyses and became a co-author. Drs. Hoffman and Youngblade planned the book together. Although each took responsibility for specific chapters, both contributed to all of the chapters.

In addition to the core group, several of the Michigan Developmental Psychology graduate students joined us in our trips to the study site to obtain classroom data and interview the children in the study individually. These included John Coley, Gil Diesendruck, Karen Fingerman, Michelle Hollander, John Seale, and Marianne Taylor. The coding of the children’s stories of their After School Day was carried out by Rebekah Levine Coley, John Coley, Tamara Halle, and Marianne Taylor. Marianne Taylor also helped develop the measure of children’s gender-role attitudes. Kate Wadsworth joined the project after the data were collected but was an intrinsic part of the group contributing statistical and computer assistance.

Undergraduates who participated in either the data collection or coding included Juan Casas, Shari Cook, Joanna Fischer, Elisa Golden, Jeff Haessler, Bryan Husk, Heather Lackey, Deanna Nagels, Mary Rubio, Lucinda Steenberger, Rachel Story, Kelly Taylor, and Jason Wanacek. We particularly want to thank Mary Jo Beck, who helped in many ways – as financial accountant, secretary, collector of teacher ratings, and all-around trouble shooter.

We are deeply grateful to the Office of Administration of the Public Schools in the city where the study took place, the principals of the partici-
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